

# THE HOUSE THAT DIED

## HENRY BORDEAUX

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# **THE HOUSE THAT DIED**

BOOKS BY  
**HENRY BORDEAUX**

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HOUGHTON

# THE HOUSE THAT DIED

(LA MAISON MORTE)

BY

HENRY BORDEAUX  
Member of the French Academy

TRANSLATED BY  
HAROLD HARPER



NEW YORK  
DUFFIELD & COMPANY  
1922

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TO THE  
MARQUIS TREDICINI DE SAINT-SEVERIN

MY DEAR FRIEND:

You are, I imagine, our mightiest "hunter before the Lord" of chamois. I was only a child when I was first filled with pity, though not without admiring you, for one of your victims beautiful even in death.

Will you allow me to offer you this book through which I hope there breathes—even through a terrible tragedy—the air of our high mountains and valleys—to offer it to you in memory of our hunts and of the warm welcome I always received in that cabin on the shores of Lake Lovitel which our dear comrade M. Joseph de Lafarge transformed into a most delightful hermitage, a true stronghold against care.

HENRY BORDEAUX

Le Maupas

*December 1st, 1921.*



# **THE HOUSE THAT DIED**



## PROLOGUE

IT is one of those old-fashioned houses built of large stone blocks, constructed entirely without the use of mortar. Yet in spite of its antiquity —the date 1630 is cut into the granite arch above the entrance to the courtyard—it mocks at time. A wooden gallery runs round the first storey which is almost completely concealed under a low roof, giving it the appearance of a face hidden beneath a hat. The sloping roof, covered with slabs of unfinished slate almost as thick as stone blocks, puts the final touch on the building which resembles a squat, thickset turtle with its head and feet drawn in for protection.

The courtyard is deserted. Anyone may walk in, for the key hangs on the door. In entering you descend a short way, the distance of two steps, and enter a hallway that opens on the left into the wood-shed, where there is a large supply of wood, enough to last through a long, severe winter. To the right is the kitchen, and through the window you catch sight of shining copper kettles and boilers. At the very end of the courtyard you come to a vast room with a paved floor, which is lighted by two windows. On each side are the stalls for cows and mules. A gutter runs down

the middle of the floor. The rest of the court is used as a dining- and bedroom combined. The dining-room is indicated by a large table of massive wood and a few shelves for dishes and utensils, nailed to the wall. The bedroom consists of those two-storeyed press-beds that occupy an entire wall and are concealed by curtains. In one corner of the beamed ceiling is a trap-door that can be opened to permit the passage of a rope-ladder, by which you ascend to the first floor, where there are other rooms. From the kitchen there is a spiral staircase also leading to this floor. Here the grain is stored, and in summer people live in it. The granary is close by.

How does it happen that in the twentieth century there are still houses where man and beast live together? Well, it does happen—just as it happened in the stable where Christ was born.

The household I am about to describe is at Bessans in Savoy. Bessans is a village of a hundred and fifty or two hundred families, situated in the Haute-Maurienne, at an altitude of over 1,700 meters. The winters up here are long and severe; snow falls so deep as to block the doors of the houses, and often the very windows. At the foot of many of the paths you will see crosses indicating the burial-places of the victims of the dreaded avalanche. So you will readily understand that the heat of a stable is by no means to be despised during the cold weather. In summer

you move upstairs when the heat becomes too intense.

The nearest railway station is forty kilometers away: it is Modane, standing at the entrance of the Fréjus Tunnel on the route to Italy. Bessans is hidden away almost at the extremity of the Valley of the Arc between the ridge of the Vanoise and that of the Charbonel. Here the earth is little more than skin and bones: vast stretches of rock, with occasional forests of pine and larch, in which clearings have been cut for a few barren farms. The land reminds one of an old fur ravaged by generations of moths. Wheat will not grow, but in the spring they sow Manitoba grain. Rye, barley and oats somehow manage to thrive, but hay is not ready to cut before July. The Valleys of Ribon and Averole, starting at Bessans and bisected by the Tierce Peak which stands dominating them and seems to threaten the village with destruction and actually deprives it of a part of the morning sun, offer mountain pastures to the flocks and herds that feed there during the summer.

At that season the melancholy denuded Maurienne presents, along the slopes of its mountains glistening with glaciers and ice-fields and in its ancient parishes rebellious to outside influence, a sad and haughty grace, like the smile of a woman guarding some sacred inner flame. No one who has set foot in this country ever forgets it. As

you enter it the most beautiful landscapes of Italy and France fade from your memory; the smiling lakes and undulating hillsides that so charmed your senses are forgotten as you forget the kermesses of the Flemings and the mechanical pageantry of the Florentines and Venetians when you first come upon the tortuous masterpieces of the Spaniards. The Alpine cars which wend their way from Modane to Lanslebourg, there to follow Napoleon's road over Mont-Cenis down to Suse in Piedmont, or those that follow the bed of the Arc as far as Bessans and Bonneval, have made the country accessible; but the occasional sojourns of tourists have altered neither its manners, its dress, nor its fundamental character.

The key, I have said, hangs on the door and I enter without asking permission of anyone. I know very well, however, that my audacity has scandalized the village.

I can sympathize with city folk who have no wish to bury themselves alive at Bessans in the Maurienne. Did not Madame de Sévigné, retiring for economy's sake to spend a winter at the Château des Roches in Brittany declare that one must have an iron constitution to remain in the country late in the season and be able to support the loneliness? Here in the Maurienne the solitude, intensified by the encircling mountains—brought closer together, as it were, in winter—requires the strongest sort of constitution, an in-

dependent mind, and a hatred of mankind, or simply a long-established habit.

Is it not strange that the people of the Commune should so sedulously avoid this house and allow it to remain open? Is it not strange that no one would ever think of renting or buying it; that it should thus stand like a condemned criminal without appeal?

Not long since I knew it when it was gay, busy, humming with life. Three generations lived there together, not counting the dog, the chickens, and the cattle. Three generations! Enough indeed to assure the conquest of the Promised Land. Three generations living under the headship of the aged patriarch, working and toiling in common, and to all appearances existing in peace. Was this not a perfect example of the ancient patriarchal family, the glory and mainstay of our rural France? And yet, within ten years the inmates have disappeared, the three generations vanished.

This disappearance of a whole race is by no means a rare phenomenon. The War has given us many similar instances. But is this sufficient to explain the reprobation which now attaches to this charming old house, meant to give shelter to man and beast alike beneath its solid and abiding roof? Must we attribute its present abandonment to some evil deed, to some hidden crime?

The Maurienne was formerly a land of sorcerers, and many superstitions still persist among its inhabitants. Still, everyone knows that houses can be exorcized, and when, at the ceremony which takes place every spring, the Curé blessed all the roofs, this one was not passed by. If you inquire of the neighbors why no one will live in it they will tell you that they do not know. The house is, after all, no one's affair, and each may do what seems good to him. But if you suggest that anyone accompany you into it, if only for a brief visit of inspection, he will turn his back on you and walk off.

Every attempt I made to penetrate the mystery ended with the "I don't know" that put an end to all discussion. How many times have I questioned the peasants of the Valley, either at Bessans—when I was last there—or at Chambéry where they came to consult me about their law-suits! "Tell me," I ask, "who owns the Couvert house?" "Nobody." "Isn't it for sale?" "I don't think so." "It's falling to pieces, isn't it?" "Oh, no, it's solid enough." "Why does no one live in it?" "I don't know." "Is it bewitched?" "Oh, we'd know if it was." "Fine people, those Couverts. I knew them intimately." "Yes, fine people." "They left a good reputation behind them." "Oh, yes." "And no one wants to live in their house? Why not?" "I don't know."

In these evasive answers I never discovered the

least malice or hint of anything suspicious; they indicated no more than a systematic refusal to say anything definite. I was eventually convinced that everyone in the parish had ended by suspecting what I suspected, and that our common suspicions were nourished rather by a secret instinct than by any logical deduction from the facts. I believed that I was the first to formulate these suspicions definitely: I was the only one with sufficient data.

I can explain the growth of this common suspicion only as a curious mental phenomenon by which the same current of thought passed through the minds of all the peasants as well as through my own. All of us, horror-stricken at our conclusion, but without proofs, held our tongues, for fear of being mistaken, or rather for fear of the law. It was not necessary to agree to this conspiracy of silence—we were united by a common instinct. No one confided his thoughts to his neighbor, nor would say why the Couvert house was now abandoned. Even today, after the passage of ten years has outlawed the crime, and the criminal, if he is still alive, is safe from justice, I feel morally certain that no one would dream of mentioning his name. Everyone knows who he is, but no one will accuse him. Here again is a singular instance of that Crowd Psychology which a modern philosopher has attempted to explain, but which still seems so obscure, so deeply hidden

in its causes and so striking in its sudden harmonious functionings, like an invisible orchestra playing in unison.

I returned to Bessans one day last autumn. As I was pressed for time I had taken an automobile at Modane and in less than two hours I was on the heights above the Haute-Maurienne, over which the clouds floated, now hiding from me the highest summits and now clinging to the flanks of the mountains. A sharp wind drove them onward: I could imagine I heard them beat like waving flags. The first snow of the season had fallen to a point only a few hundred meters above the valley bottom. It glistened as the sun touched it. The reddish fields added their color to the thin soil, and the purple shrubs and larches, like golden candelabra, vividly contrasted with the never-changing pines. After leaving Lanslebourg, the town that stands at the head of the road into Italy—or rather a little the other side of Lanslevillard with its stone steeple standing on a rock like a pedestal—you have indeed penetrated into the heart of this savage and fascinating district. The country appears to be defending itself, as it actually did defend itself in the distant past when the Saracens made it their last foot-hold. The name “Maurienne” is a heritage from the Moors who during the whole of the tenth century inhabited it after the failure of their invading expeditions. It was the Count

Bérold de Savoie, father of the great Humbert aux Blanches-Mains who finally drove them out of Bessans and Bonneval. Near Lanslevillard you may still see the remains of the Saracens' wall. But there was hardly need here of artificial fortification, as Nature had amply defended the place. Between Lanslevillard and Bessans you must cross the Pass of La Madeleine, a barren deserted spot below which you hear the hurrying current of the querulous Green Arc. As you leave the Pass, the horizon widens out and the valley lies before you hedged in between the glaciers of Méan-Martin and the Croix de Don-Juan-Maurice, beyond which stretch the fertile districts of the Tarentaise, Roche-Melon, the Charbonel, and Albaron, which last mark the boundary between Savoy and Italy. The belfry of the Bessans church, covered with sheet-iron, reflects each shifting ray of sunlight to a distance of many miles. You cross the Arc and before you stands the village, a collection of huddled roofs; just above it and to one side is a large Calvary with its terrible image of the Christ, looking as if it had been cast down from the frowning heights above. The little church is built on a small rise of ground and stands like a shepherd tending his flocks. The slate-covered houses complete the resemblance by looking very much like sheep, trembling at the approach of a storm.

I mounted the knoll by the church and stood in

the cemetery by the small chapel of St. Anthony, whose walls are covered with frescoes painted centuries ago by native artists. There I sought protection from the mountain wind. It was Sunday, and I saw women and girls arriving from the little village of Averole which is, I believe, next to Écot and Bonneval, the highest hamlet in France, lying at a height of over two thousand meters; it is about an hour's walk from the parish. The women come to church mounted on asses and mules, sitting astride, without stirrups, spurring the little beasts with a kick on the flanks. The Bessans costume is of the simple Spanish type: a wide black skirt, black waist, an apron or a fichu of dark brown or blue, and head-dress of black tulle, which allows the coiffure to emerge at the back of the head, the whole surmounted by a knot of ribbons that float out gaily behind. This is the only bright spot to relieve the severity of the rest of the costume. While the old ladies or women in mourning wear a black ribbon, the young girls deck themselves out in bright red, scarlet, and orange. The contrast is striking. The bright ribbon dances in the breeze like a darting ray of sunlight, the reflection of a burning thought that will not brook confinement. It is like a flame in the night.

These women's features are noticeably regular, though sometimes you will find them accentuated —a hooked nose, perhaps, or a pointed chin. It

is said that there are traces of Saracen blood in their veins. They are indeed generally dark-complexioned, though I have seen girls with auburn hair. Everyone carries himself with a nobility and easy grace the like of which you will rarely see among our other French peasants. A trip to Bessans will give you the same impression of being on foreign soil that you receive at Fontarabie on the Spanish frontier.

I walked round the Couvert house, which stands a little apart in the outskirts of the village. This time I dared not enter, I who had been a guest there for so many years. The superstition that clings to it and protects it had ended by taking complete possession of me. The key, as always, hangs on the door, but my hand avoided it as if I feared it would burn me. Not the palace of the sons of Atreus itself is more effectively protected than is this house.

Within its wall was enacted a peasant drama which, to me at least, evokes almost as fatefully the memory of the Furies or the apparition of the Ghost at Elsinore. I cannot tell the story of this drama from the "inside": that would presuppose my knowing things which I do not know. I shall therefore recount only the external events and content myself with bringing together the details which have gradually accumulated in my memory; these details have become an obsession and at last a positive conviction. Today the crime

is expiated, not by its perpetrator, but by a voluntary offering of prayer and of blood on the part of many innocent victims. Is the murderer still alive? There has been no news of him since his mysterious departure. The house has disgorged him; it could no longer abide his presence, for the very stones have a soul, and every stone would curse him. Today their solitude is in itself an accusation.

# CHAPTER I

## THREE GENERATIONS

EVERY year, previous to the war, I took advantage of the annual vacation accorded to magistrates to leave Chambéry and spend three or four weeks at Bessans in the Maurienne, in the châlet of La Lombarde, situated still higher up in the mountains. I used to hunt heathercock and chamois—royal game—on the slopes of the Charbonel, of Albaron, or of Roche-Melon. These, as I have already explained, are the heights between Bessans and Bonneval, dividing Savoy from Italy. At this extremity of the Valley of the Arc the passes are numerous—the Neck of La Lombarde, through which passed the army of Count Bérold, and the Neck of the Arnès, and the numerous passes of La Lévanna, which are more difficult and therefore preferred by poachers and smugglers, who are at home anywhere in the mountains. On these tramps I was as good as the best of the masters of the mountain; and I am not sure but that on one occasion I shot a chamois in the preserves of His Majesty the King of Italy beyond the frontier, and even dragged him home, hotly pursued by the game wardens. The famous Blanc—called the “Bailiff,” he came from Bon-

neval and was easily the peer of the celebrated guides Michel Croz and Coutet of Chamonix—knows something about that, but he will not betray me.

I cannot recall without a thrill of pride these expeditions of my youth; the climb in the freshness of the early morning, the choice of a hiding-place behind a rock, situated often on the very edge of a glacier or ice-field; and then while waiting, the view of the horizon, every detail of it, my eye wandering down to the slopes of green, dotted here and there with junipers and tufts of bilberry, fiery red as though they had been burned by the sun; or again, up to the mountain-tops, the snowy immaculate peaks resplendent in the crystal air, their whiteness standing out sharp against the deep azure sky—a sky at once pure, massive and yet limpid, in no way reminiscent of the blue of the Orient or that of Italy. It is simply the blue of Savoy, purified by the air as it comes in contact with the virgin heights. And there would come past me a whole herd of chamois fleeing from the beaters pursuing them in the valley below; a marvelous exhibition of agility. As they leaped over some rocky precipice, I could see each muscle distended and observe the black hoofs so divided as to allow them to make their dangerous way over a course that is as easy to them as the grass race-track to a thoroughbred on Derby Day. How often have I lingered to watch

them and missed my shot, unable to make up my mind to fire. They were too noble, too fine, too heroic! Then they would come close to me, and I could distinguish their little heads with the curling black horns, their pointed, mobile ears, and velvety soft brown eyes. Then, of a sudden, scenting me, they would turn sharply and scamper off at a terrific speed, performing the most perilous manœuvres, at the risk of slipping and falling on the rocks below. At that moment they become the enemy—they are manœuvring! I quickly take aim and fire. The bullet strikes one of them; he falls, his body stretched out in the very act of leaping; I approach and discover that he is only wounded. Seeing me he makes an heroic effort, rises to his feet and runs on, forcing me to pursue him into almost inaccessible places, across perilous chasms, the chamois all the while struggling against fresh wounds and trailing a broken foot behind him. But the chamois never surrenders, and his blood—so hot as to burn the hands that touch it—is an antidote against dizziness and fear.

During the hunting season I stayed at the home of one of my clients—a sly old rascal, past master in the art of entangling business affairs, juggling with assessment records, suborning witnesses, and securing advantageous grants defining the course of the waterways running through his property. This man was Jean-Pierre Couvert. The court-

house was his theater, and there he was the leading actor, indeed the whole show. His everlasting lawsuits gave him legitimate excuse for frequent trips to town. The peasant likes lawsuits because they give him an opportunity for mixing with his fellow-beings in cities. He requires diversion. But this sort of diversion is, to say the least, rather expensive.

A room on the first storey, just over the court-yard, was always set aside for my use. This room opened out upon a gallery surmounted by a sloping roof which was so low that it seemed on the point of slipping down on top of one.

Jean-Pierre's eldest son, the unmarried Benoît, ordinarily used this room, but when I came he moved out together with his few belongings and lived in the granary. The family lived all together, as families frequently do in this part of the country.

In his day old Jean-Pierre had been a hard task-master. In a district where grave disdainful manners are the rule, he stood out above all the others; he had a natural majesty and haughty solemnity which old age had only accentuated, and which he never for a moment forgot, even when haggling over prices in the market-place or driving a particularly hard bargain. There was a good deal of the Saracen in old Jean-Pierre. Like the other good Mauriennais he treated women as an inferior species.

Consequently his wife Pétronille obeyed her husband implicitly. She performed instantly and without complaint every service he demanded of her, understanding even the wordless but no less unequivocal commands he gave by throwing a wine-bottle or cider-jug at her head—a pantomimic performance sometimes necessary after heavy drinking. She glided to and fro in her soft slippers and no sound betrayed her presence as she busied herself indoors or went out to pump water from the well, carried the watering-pots, cooked the meals or fed the chickens. In spite of these duties she found time to attend mass once or twice on week-days and on Sundays as well. She was so unobtrusive that no matter how much she had to do she gave one the impression of never stirring from one spot. She radiated a spirit of peace upon everyone about her. Without preaching, without scolding, she exercised a beneficent influence so subtle that you did not realize it until long after you had felt its effects. I was myself not conscious of this until some years after I came to know her. I was in the habit of considering Pétronille a nonentity, and then one fine morning I discovered that I had been living in the presence of a saint. Saintliness, like genius, is revealed in sudden flashes. It comes, as it goes, during the course of our every-day life.

The two sons of this aged couple—they had

two daughters as well, one who died a nun, and one who "went to the bad" in Paris—were Benoît and Claude. Benoît was the elder, a different person in every way from his brother. Such contrasts are not unusual in families and are the result either of heredity or of an early antagonism which increases with the years.

The elder was an uncommunicative, taciturn fellow; he was never quite comfortable in the presence of his domineering father, a man who often burst into declamatory invective, and his younger brother, an eloquent, talkative youth, scintillating, restless, boastful. He had sought refuge from these two in work; he had made of work his fortress, and taken it upon himself to do the hard manual labor. In summer it was he who went off to live alone in a chalet up at La Lombarde, high above Bessans, tending the sheep at pasture and making the famous blue cheeses for which Bessans is celebrated. He was a tall clean-shaven man with hard regular features, and an ironic gleam in his eye; a person very difficult to know, the kind who talks philosophy the moment you begin a conversation with him. On Sundays after he had washed his face and donned clean clothes, he was quite presentable. The girls made eyes at him after mass, but he passed them by disdainfully.

More than once his mother had spoken to him on the subject of marriage, but he invariably

turned a deaf ear. It was some time before I accustomed myself to his unsocial, or rather barbaric, manners; nevertheless, I succeeded by degrees in dragging from him a whole collection of proverbs, maxims, and meteorological pronouncements by which one may determine weather conditions by observing the moon and the clouds. For instance: "If the April moon begins ill, it ends well"; or, "Red clouds in the morn make the mill-wheel turn." Exact observations these, and very useful to those who live out-of-doors. When the evening clouds are red it is a sign of good weather; when they are red in the morning it means rain. As for the importance of the moon in matters of atmospheric changes, that is universally acknowledged. If, for instance, his mother had insisted that he choose a wife, as his brother had done he would have objected: "Two pots on the hearth mean good cheer, but two women mean a tempest"; or else, "There should be no more women at supper than there are pot-hooks on the hearth." You ought to hear these proverbs spoken in patois; they lose their satiric flavor when transferred to cold type, and the patois of our country defies transcription, requiring as it does a special kind of pronunciation.

Benoît was by no means lacking in common sense; his sagacity was profound. I was interested in him and made serious efforts to know him more intimately. The occasion finally came,

but strangely enough the moment we found ourselves becoming friends we were both embarrassed and ill at ease, for there arose between us an indefinable something, the reasons for which I came to know, only too well, at a later time.

The more Benoît held aloof from others the more Claude gave in to his own exuberant spirits; while the one shrank from the society of people, the other was everlastingly in search of an audience.

Picture to yourself a short man with a beard, remarkably agile in spite of a rotund, well-nourished body, continually on the move and making eyes at every pretty woman he saw. Claude was endowed by nature with the ability to move the skin on his forehead down over his eyes, to the infinite delight of his friends. He could also wriggle the lobes of his ears, a performance that never failed to fascinate children. He was skilful with his hands and excelled in nearly every manual accomplishment from sewing to shooting a rifle; his legs carried him up the steepest ascents and down the sharpest grades; he could play any musical instrument, performing on the flute with his nose, on the ocharina with his lips and tongue, and on the accordeon with his arms, while his whole body danced the accompaniment. The man's uncanny knack of being in many places at the same time was surely a gift of the devil. People were seeing him everywhere, and the moment

he appeared on the scene everyone felt happier, and smiles spread over faces in expectation of "something good." Children's eyes glistened when they heard his footsteps, which were easily recognized by their rapidity—a rare thing with peasants.

At home he had of course undertaken the management of outside affairs—the selling of grain, cheese, and cattle, and attending fairs. He often went off to the outlying districts, Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne, Moutiers-Tarentaise, Saint-Pierre-d'Albigny on the banks of the Isère, and Bourg-Saint-Maurice at the foot of the Petit Saint-Bernard. He could do wonders with a dilapidated cart and an old mule.

In spite of the many enterprises in which he engaged, he brought very little money home, but his father would accept with paternal indulgence whatever Claude brought back, without a murmur of complaint. The lad was exceptionally clever at avoiding the frequent remonstrances of his mother.

He had married a girl from Ceresole in Italy, a village the other side of the Lévanna, brought within the domain of modern progress by the discovery of iron-water springs, and turned into a watering-place for the summer season. Her name was Maddalena Corona. She had lived the life of a peasant during the winter and been a chambermaid at the hotel during the season. She

had doubtless been won by Claude's amusing grimaces and the description he had given her of the Valley of the Arc. She looked like a Primitive Madonna, with her triangular face, her forehead bound tight in a kerchief, her ivory complexion, and her slight, graceful figure. Her welcome at the Couvert home would have been a very cold one had it not been for the generous warm heart of Pétronille. I learned this later, when I first began coming to Bessans. The dignified old Jean-Pierre and the taciturn Benoît did not fail by their manner, if not by words, to reproach her for being a foreigner in this valley whose people are proud of their Savoyard past and consider themselves a chosen people. Claude's frequent absences from home left the girl entirely without defence. But gradually she had insinuated herself into the good graces of the old man—to win her brother-in-law was a different matter. Since the mother managed the household, Maddalena was enabled to give free rein to her religious propensities, which were manifested in a more or less external manner, as is usual with Italians.

She was not satisfied with making pilgrimages to St. Anthony, the patron saint of Bessans, and to St. Sebastian, the chief saint of Lanslevillard, to all the little shrines that dot the countryside—and to that of Saint Come, Saint-Landry, Saint-Laurence, Notre-Dame-des-Glaces or Notre-Dame-des-Neiges, or to all the other calvaries in this old

and pious district. After she had visited these she insisted on going to the more famous sanctuaries in remoter regions, Notre Dame-du-Poivre near Termignon, so called in memory of a spice merchant who, returning from Italy and overtaken by a storm, invoked the Virgin and promised her his goods; Notre-Dame-de-Charmaix among the pines of the Fréjus above Modane, founded, it is said, by Charlemagne; Saint-Jean-Baptiste at Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne where you may see three fingers of the saint who baptized Christ, brought back from Egypt by a Valloire shepherdess; and still farther away, the shrines of Notre-Dame-de-Myans, near Chambéry (that one stopped the course of an avalanche from Mont-Granier); Notre-Dame-de-Laus near Gap (commemorating certain apparitions of the Virgin in the seventeenth century); and finally the shrine of Salette, that rises above the Valley of the Bonne—the most celebrated of all. This is under the spiritual guidance of the ecstatic little Mélanie, elder sister of Bernadette of Lourdes and, like her, a shepherdess.

At first her zealous devotion met with some resistance, not from her husband who was always ready for a long trip and would willingly have gone to Jerusalem if he had been able—and would there no doubt have treated some pretty Saracen as did many a crusader—but from the two other men who disapproved of the vagabond journeys

and complained of their cost while the children were allowed to run wild at home. The good Pétronille made every imaginable excuse for her daughter-in-law, and even did special favors for her. It was better that the girl should satisfy her religious cravings than her personal vanity, for instance. Maddalena indeed had not willingly accommodated herself to the rigidly severe style of Bessans. Bessans required the wearing of black, while the other parishes, Saint-Colomban, Saint-Sorlin-d'Arves, Saint-Jean-d'Arves, and Fontcouverte, ran to fine laces in star and crescent designs, golden fichus, red waists, blue skirts, and variegated aprons. Maddalena had brought with her a whole outfit of brilliantly colored clothes, scarlet shawls, and gay-spangled sashes which delighted her husband but displeased the head of the family and Benoît, both of whom were uncompromising in matters of tradition and hostile to all innovation. One day, however, either because she had wearied of her own resistance or had discovered that the local costume was becoming to her madonna-like beauty, she bowed to the inevitable and donned the sombre dress of the district, keeping only a fire-colored ribbon which fluttered about her neck; this she would never consent to hide or curtail.

Maddalena was about thirty when I first came to the Couvert home. She was one of those dark-complexioned women who never had much fresh-

ness but seem able to retain a relative youthfulness which endures, if not for a whole lifetime, at least for many years. As a matter of fact, during all the time I knew her, I observed scarcely any change in her appearance. That was fifteen or sixteen years ago, perhaps more. I see her setting the table with a certain nonchalance, her face grave, her voice droning the refrain of some sad old Piedmont song. I have no idea what she was thinking of. What peasant women do think of is often beyond our comprehension; perhaps she was thinking of nothing at all? Her pious excursions, had given her a certain keenness of wit which often surprised me, though she never spoke many words at one time.

When she was at home two little boys and a girl were continually with her: Etienne, Jean-Marie, and Catherine—who was called Rina, the Italian diminutive. When she was not at home they clung to the skirts of their tireless and complacent grandmother. Etienne was the eldest, a serious boy of twelve, touched perhaps by some spark of the religious fire kindled in the mother through her contact with some miraculous sanctuary. It was planned that he should enter the priesthood, a career he would have followed even had his determination not been strengthened by a terrible and momentous discovery. Then came Catherine, aged nine or ten, and finally Jean-Marie, aged six. Jean-Marie was a chubby-faced, healthy animal,

very like a little dog playing in the sun, literally overflowing with superabundant health and happiness.

I used to take Claude with me when I went hunting. That was my way of ridding myself of a formidable rival, for if he had been allowed to hunt by himself I would have accomplished little. There was no one else so intimately acquainted with the habitat of the chamois—often situated as they are at the foot of a rocky peak, on some deserted pasture perched high on a steep precipice, or else in a pine wood studded with rocks and gashed by crevasses. He knew them all. He followed the migrations of the chamois and went wild with despair if they retreated to a different canton, but pursued them to discover their new residence, chased them off the best grazing grounds away from that bright green grass which they prefer to all others—called by our mountain folk *corne de cerf* or deer-horn, because of its peculiar twist. I suspected that during the mating season in November, or in April, he killed more than one, contrary to all the rules of the chase. My bare feet had trod chamois skins—at Bessans and at the little châlet up in the mountains—far thicker than any I ever saw during the summer! But so long as he was in my service he was the soul of fairness. How pleasant it was to have him with me, not only to plan every detail of the chase but to look after the food and drink!

In the twinkling of an eye he would gather twigs, light a fire, and cook a meal. His Italian dishes—which he learned from his wife who had doubtless filched the recipes from the hotel in Ceresole where she had worked—were sometimes a little too highly spiced, but they put new life into our exhausted bodies and amply satisfied our appetites. How well I remember his “minestrone,” a soup composed of every variety of vegetable to which he added olives and noodles; his rice, browned to a turn; and above all, his fried mushrooms. These he had gathered in the fields and woods, discovering them by a happy instinct. I recall their umbrella-like forms, the tenderest ones hardly opened, juicy, golden-tinted, white and red. When others returned from foraging expeditions empty-handed you would see him laden with spoils smelling of the forest. Truly he was a precious adjunct, a man I could never hope to replace. Hunting lost its attraction for me after his tragic death.

I was about to omit one detail, a detail of some importance to all—and their number is legion—who have suffered the tortures of thirst in the mountains and are unwilling to adopt the substitute suggested by Théophile Gautier: “After the hunt I have only the water of the heavens to drink; I drink it out of my hands. But the path I follow is virgin earth and knows not the tread of the feet of man.”

At our picnic lunches the gourds—for the wine—were always iced: he had set them in little rock pockets where snow had lodged; these he had discovered and marked beforehand. Rabelais would have knighted him for discovering the secret of serving cool drinks in the summertime.

It is necessary to remark that the peasants of the Maurienne do not in the least conform to our common ideas regarding their kind. Their country is an old one, for twenty centuries and more the scene of the greatest historic events. This district witnessed the passage of Hannibal with his Carthaginians, his Numidians, his Spaniards, and his blacks, his numberless cavalcade of elephants and strange monsters driven by Hindoos. It has also witnessed the passage—and the return after defeat—of the greatest conquerors and generals: Hasdrubal, Marius, and Cæsar, the Barbarian invaders; Charlemagne the Invincible; Louis the Debonnaire who founded the Hospice of Mont-Cenis; Charles the Bald who died at Avrieux on the banks of the Arc, poisoned by his doctor the Jew Sedecias; Charles VII and Francis the First, splendid princes eager to bring into France the art and magnificence of the Italian Renaissance; the armies of the Revolution with the greatest of their warriors; Napoleon the Emperor, who almost perished in the snows; and the troops of the Second Empire coming to help the Italians in their struggle for freedom. During

the last Great War the leaders of the nation, together with the generals-in-chief met at Modane, and in November, 1917, camions crossed the Alps laden with French and English soldiers going to reinforce our Latin brothers on the Piave.

Such scenes have left their impress on the entire people, whose ardent imaginations demand and feed upon the supernatural, the miraculous, the abnormal.

The peasant casts his eyes up over the glaciers that circle about him and threaten destruction, and dreams of overcoming the laws of gravity and of time. He delights in skirting the borderland of the future: The prophetess Cancianile comes from Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne to announce dire catastrophes, cholera, war and famine. The peasant believes implicitly in sorcerers and magicians who bewitch cattle and cast spells, and ride to ghostly nocturnal meetings on broomsticks. Where but in the Maurienne would it have been possible for a whole school of children to determine to cross the mountains and deliver the Pope who, they heard, had been made a prisoner;<sup>1</sup>

or for a village curé, the victim of an attempted murder, to secure protection only by taking into his service the man who tried to kill him?<sup>2</sup> Such

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<sup>1</sup> See *La Nouvelle Croisade des enfants*, by Henry Bordeaux.

<sup>2</sup> See the same writer's *Le Curé de Lanslevillard* in the *Carnet d'un stagiaire*.

things are not wondered at here, so deeply rooted is the desire to escape from every-day realities, to live strenuously, to taste the bitter, to slip from the actual into the land of dreams, of deviltry, or the open skies above.

The Maurienne has at all times preserved intact its own peculiar form of civilization, the legends and tales and mysteries of which are transmitted orally from generation to generation. Those of her soldiers who saw Flanders, Italy, the Rhine or the Orient, and were fortunate enough to return, have added new elements to the old. Some of the tales you hear nowadays are obviously modern, as for instance that of the Bessans peasant who befriended a wolf and was in turn saved by the animal. As far back as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—perhaps earlier, for the memory of man is lost in the night of time—Bessans had her own painters and poets. The artists of Burgundy or the Low Countries as they passed over the Alps from Italy, laden with wondrous spoils, stopped here and paid for their board and lodging with drawings or statuettes. The secrets of the new art were soon learned and men in the Valley began to paint. The frescoes in the Chapel of St. Sebastian at Lanslevillard and in St. Anthony at Bessans (especially the former, which are better preserved) are simple and rather crude, but they bear witness to a genuine primitive school which flourished a little later than that of the Italians.

One Jean Clappier<sup>3</sup> of Bessans set to carving wood; he did a number of very quaint altar screens and statues of the saints. He founded a school in his own family, as well as in the village where, forty years later, a certain Vincendet succeeded him: *he* specialized in the carving of wooden devils. It was by such men as these that the oratories, chapels, and sanctuaries hereabouts were decorated.

While the Mystery of the Passion was being performed at Chambéry, the Last Judgment at Modane, and the Patron of Tours at Saint-Martin-de-la-Porte, the dramatists of Bessans gave performances either in the open or in the Chapel of St. Anthony, offering the Mystery of St. Sebastian, or the Nativity, or Job. The simple and unaffected dialogue of these plays has survived and in it we may read charming commentaries on the Annunciation and the Incarnation—words that are possibly no more than transpositions of a prose *Noël* attributed to St. Bernard himself. For instance: “Jesus entered into her—of this there is no doubt—as the sun passes through a window without breaking the glass.”

In the Mystery of St. Sebastian Folly takes possession of the entire world for her kingdom: “For

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<sup>3</sup>See *Les Peintures murales des chapelles Saint-Sébastien et Saint-Antoine à Lanslevillard et Bessans*, by Lucien Bégule; Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts of Lyons. (Rey, Lyons, 1918).

Folly hath at all seasons more subjects than the king himself. So many people ask for me that I cannot serve them all. Methinks I shall find it hard to visit all my good subjects between here and Turin in a single day."

The good people of Bessans, guided by an instinct of local patriotism not altogether devoid of modesty, have appropriated to themselves the Infant Jesus who, according to them, was born not at Bethlehem but at Bessans. It was the shepherds of the Maurienne who were the first to adore Him, for is it not related that when the Virgin was confined an ox and an ass were in the stable with her? And everyone knows that men and beasts live together only in the Maurienne.

We have then a parish of five or six hundred people, situated at an altitude of 1,700 meters above sea-level where means of communication are few; a district which in the 16th century had poets to write its plays, actors to interpret them, and painters to make scenery. And we still speak of the ignorance of bygone ages and boast of our progress in education!<sup>4</sup>

This extraordinary civilization, in which exist at once a simple credulity and a thirst for knowledge, has managed to perpetuate itself from age to age. Scholars have recently published the diary

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<sup>4</sup> See *Récits mauriennais*, a monthly review edited by the Abbé Truchet (Imprimerie Nulliermet at Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne, 1889.)

of a Bessans peasant, Etienne Vincendet, written during the French Revolution. This Vincendet wielded the pen very much as he handled his chisel, for he was both writer and sculptor, though he had not studied either of the arts he practised. In his diary he describes with the utmost precision the political rumblings and economic upheavals so far from his native Valley; his are the remarks of a practical, sane-minded fellow and his attitude on the situation is entirely unlike that of any other peasant of his day.<sup>5</sup> Nowadays the people of Bessans occupy their leisure hours during the winter in wood-carving, or else go to Paris as taxi drivers, returning after the Grand Prix to sow their fields. It was only the other day that the Academy Council—quite wrongly, I think—were very much worked up over the discovery of secret societies in the stables where the traditions of this valley were being taught. The societies were forthwith suppressed.

My friends the Couverts were typical specimens of this race of dreamers and practical men, as formidable in the market-place as they are pious at their sacred shrines. From the very first I had noticed traces of defiance in Maddalena's attitude toward her brother-in-law, Benoît, and in him a haughtiness and cynicism on the occasions

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<sup>5</sup> See the *Journal d'un paysan de Maurienne pendant la Révolution et l'Empire*, published by François Vermale, (Dardel, Chambéry, 1919.)

when Claude amused the company with his everlasting babble and queer amusing antics. But all such indications of diverse and antipathetic temperaments—almost unavoidable in houses where the family lives together—were minimized, and soon vanished altogether under the influence of the saintly Pétronille, and besides, the children, happily ignorant of the temperamental vagaries of their elders, prevented any sort of outbreak between the others.

For five years, during the hunting season, I was a guest in this home without once realizing that I stood over a yawning chasm. I felt absolutely at home there, joked with Maddalena, smoked my pipe with the old man, asked advice of his saintly wife, played with the children and almost succeeded in inducing Benoît to emerge from his seclusion. As for Claude, my companion, he was a real friend. So far as I was concerned, my true happiness was there at Bessans, in the bosom of this united family where three generations were in gradual process of carrying on the torch of their age-old and noble traditions. It was in the midst of this that the murder was committed.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ARC GIVES UP THE BODY

THIS is how it happened. I am here writing my deposition as witness, not merely the bare facts I gave to the court at Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne, but with the addition of certain details and observations which occurred to me at a later time. It was this additional data which served to strengthen and finally to confirm my suspicions.

We had installed ourselves for the season in the narrow Valley of La Lombarde, a prolongation of the Valley of Averole that begins at Bessans and runs down between the vast heights of Le Charbonel and Albaron. The Valley is inhabited only during the summer months, when the shepherds bring their flocks there to pasture.

The Couverts own two châlets, one of which was used by Benoît, who lived alone tending sheep and making cheese. Claude and I used the other, which is higher up and more comfortable than Benoît's. I had selected this because it was near the hiding-places and also because a secret instinct had taught me that the brothers did not care to be too near to each other. None the less, it was convenient to have Benoît not too far away,

as he supplied us with fresh milk. Besides, Madalena rode up on her mule with provisions several days a week, bringing with her my mail. In former years she brought with her on these excursions one of her sons, but now the boys were growing up: Etienne, the elder, was nearly seventeen and Jean-Marie was twelve, and they were needed on the farm.

One day—it was the 12th of September a dozen years ago—we returned from hunting rather earlier than usual (I think it was between four and five), carrying a chamois we had killed on the edge of the Arnés Glacier near the Italian border. I made a present of him to Claude, who seemed very anxious to have him.

“I’ve got time to take it down to Bonneval this evening,” he said.

“Why to Bonneval and not Bessans? Bonneval’s a long way.”

“Because the Bonneval hotel wants it for their guests.”

“You can’t return in time for the hunt tomorrow?”

“Why not? I’ll walk back at night.”

“Then listen to me: we shan’t start so early in the morning. Come back tomorrow, and spend the night at Bessans with your wife.”

“Oh, my wife!”

And he spat on the ground to show what he thought of that. Inasmuch as this is not an un-

common performance among the Mauriennais, I ought to have paid no attention to it. As I have already said, women are considered an inferior race. But this was different: Claude had hitherto treated Maddalena at least with kindness and consideration if not with positive respect. The act in itself was nothing, but I could not help noticing the man's attitude. It was strange.

I added: "Perhaps you'll meet her on the path. She's due with provisions today. Or—why not wait for her? You could put the chamois on her mule?"

"I haven't time for that. I'd rather depend on my own legs and arms—it's surer. I'll find a cart at Bessans."

As we stood talking he cleaned the animal and bound its feet together. Then he slung the carcass over his shoulders like a trophy, while the pretty wild head of the chamois with its black curved horns fell over his neck and down his back. Claude looked like a bearded faun, cruel and tricky. He stuck his pipe in his mouth, grasped his stick, whistled for his dog "Coal," and plunged into the woods.

It was the last time I saw Claude alive.

That night the beaters cooked supper for me. The soup they served me was not, indeed, Claude's soup, nor did the mushroom omelette or fricassees approach the high standard Claude had set. But I made the best of it.

Just after nightfall we had a storm, a sudden

unannounced mountain tempest, that prevented my leaving the châlet.

"Claude must now be at Bonneval," I remarked to the men.

"He'll spend the night there, too," said one of them.

Everyone laughed loudly. I took this as an allusion to Claude's love of drink or possibly to some amorous adventure, for I knew his reputation. I allowed the comment to pass and said nothing.

The châlet trembled with the repeated buffets of the wind as if some mountain demon were shaking it like a salad-basket. The rain trickled through the roof and at first I found it impossible to sleep. Later, when I awoke from a moment's doze, I caught sight through a small hole in the roof of a clear and starry sky. The stars twinkled with the unaccustomed freshness they assume just before or after a severe rain. "Beautiful weather for hunting," I thought as I rolled over and went to sleep. I awoke late and verified the truth of my prediction: there was every promise of a soft-fair day. I was sorry now I had allowed Claude to spend the night below.

"He's not back yet?" I inquired.

"Not yet."

And again the men laughed. At about eleven I became impatient and went down as far as Benoît's hut. I found him stripped to the waist,

washing his clothes and hanging them up to dry. Referring to his informal costume I said with a laugh:

"I see you went out in the storm last night and got a good drenching."

"I was after one of the cows," he explained.

"Did you see Claude?"

"No."

"He was taking a chamois to Bonneval and he's not come back yet."

"Bonneval's quite a distance."

"Didn't you see him last evening on his way down?"

"No."

"Has Maddalena come up? Yesterday was her day, you know."

"Oh yes, I saw her."

"She didn't come to us."

"Here's some mail she left. She came late last night."

"But you didn't allow her to go back in that storm, did you?"

He looked me straight in the eye, as he answered: "No: she didn't go back till early this morning."

Knowing him as I did I could read the thought he had not put into words: "I'm not an absolute brute, as you seem to insinuate. Though I've never gone out of my way to oblige my sister-in-law, I'm not one to send her away from my house

on a night like last night. In the Maurienne we have some sense of the fitness of things!"

"Well," I said, turning to go, "so much the worse. We'll have to go hunting without him."

The hunt that day, already seriously delayed, was not successful. My beaters set about their business in a lackadaisical way. We returned home out of sorts. I was in a mood to vent my ill-humor on Claude, only Claude had not yet put in an appearance. This time there was no laughing. No one could remember when a hunter had failed to turn up after a night of pleasure. Evidently something unusual had occurred: perhaps he had slipped on the way down the mountain, it was not impossible, laden as he was with a heavy chamois, or maybe he had quarreled in some wine-shop at Bonneval. I recalled how on one occasion I had had to intervene with the local police in an affair of that kind.

After supper I took a lantern and descended to Benoît's chalet. The door was closed, and I shouted. No answer: the shepherd must have gone, for the pasture gate had been carefully fastened. He had, no doubt, been summoned to Bes-sans. There was no longer room for uncertainty: something out of the ordinary had happened to Claude.

I was too tired to go down into the valley and make sure. I waited therefore until morning and at sunrise I set out.

When I entered the house everyone was in the stable courtyard, fully dressed; no one had gone to bed. I could see that the crisis of wailing and lamentation had already passed. It was now succeeded by a period of mute despair. No one uttered a word, not even little Jean-Marie, who stood clinging to his grandmother. The silence was the more moving as it was the only manifestation of grief. It was with considerable trepidation that I dared break the silence by asking:

“What has happened?”

Naturally it was old Jean-Pierre who answered, weighing each word and preserving his majestic dignity in the presence of this overwhelming calamity:

“They’re looking for him.”

“He’s not come back yet?”

“No.”

“How do you know?”

“Night before last he came to show the chamois to the children before taking it to Bonneval, and to borrow a mule from Péraz, our neighbor. Our own mule, you know, was up at the châlet—Maddalena took him with her. Yesterday morning the mule came back to Bonneval alone. Coal ran on ahead and waked us up with his barking.”

Coal, you will remember, was Claude’s little black dog. The old man went on:

“We opened the door and let him in. Why did he come back without his master? We thought

maybe the boy'd lost his way. But the dog kept on barking: we couldn't make him stop. Claude hadn't come back at sunrise. That was queer, because he ought to've brought us the money from the chamois, so I took Etienne with me and we followed the dog. He led us to the butcher's in Bonneval, and then to the inn, and then to the road."

"He was taking you over the path his master had gone?"

"That was it. Before you get to the châlets of Barmanière the road goes alongside the stream: At one place Coal began barking like the devil, and led us over to the bank and then right down to the water. We didn't find anything there."

"The current must have carried the body off, eh? You remember Saint-Landry?"

Saint-Landry was a monk held in especial honor throughout the Valley, a man who had come from Piedmont to win over the people of Bessans and Bonneval from their Saracen faith. The inhabitants of Bonneval had thrown him into the Arc. His body was recovered at Lanslevillard, without the trace of a wound or scratch upon it, in spite of the swiftness of the current that had rolled and tumbled it for a distance of ten kilometers.

"Yes, the Arc is very high now. It might have carried the body downstream. But not very far. They're looking for him now between Bessans and Bonneval."

"There's still hope so long as the body hasn't been found."

"No. Dogs aren't like people. They're never wrong."

As the father rendered this solemn verdict Benoît went off. They had sent little Jean-Marie for him the evening before, but he could not come at that time, as his flocks required all his attention. He must now return to them.

The aged Petronille had fallen to her knees on the stone floor of the stable, the others following her example: the children, Maddalena, Jean-Pierre, and I myself. She had put on her glasses to read the prayers from her Book of Hours recommending the departed soul to God. In the intervals between prayers the mule could be heard crunching his meal and chasing flies off with a switch of his tail or a sudden kick.

As Pétronille was in the middle of a particularly difficult passage—she was little used to reading—we heard footsteps in the outer courtyard. I was the first to stand up: I was sure it was someone coming to announce the recovery of the body.

I stepped outside quickly. I was not mistaken, for I saw a large crowd of people who had gathered there out of motives of curiosity, or perhaps compassion. They pressed close about the litter, which was covered with a sheet. I lifted a corner of this and saw the face of my

faithful comrade. His beard was matted and his eyes wide open, fixed in a last expression of anguish: he had doubtless realized the danger as he struggled in the icy torrent. The little black dog, in a state of utter exhaustion, his tongue hanging from his mouth, crouched by his master's side. Strangely enough, no member of the family left the stable, though they must all have heard what I had heard.

The Curé of Bessans joined the others and it was he who went in to the family. No one had thought of doing that! The stretcher-bearers and their companions marched slowly in, carrying their burden with an air of stolid indifference. It was only when they had deposited it within the doorway that they realized the tragic effect they had produced. The family followed the Curé in the direction of the stretcher. He took Rina and Jean-Marie each by the hand, but released them in the presence of the dead. That expression of human piety which ordinarily gave an air of severity to the priest's features became at once transfigured, assuming a supernatural brightness, as if he were celebrating the most sacred mysteries. He approached the stretcher and in the presence of parents, wife, and children, blessed the body. His words and gestures spread a tranquil beauty over the tragic scene. Maddalena alone was unable to restrain herself, and burst into a fit of sobbing. Such was the custom

of her country, and no one was surprised. Again Pétronille fell to her knees. I was standing near her and distinctly heard her sigh rather than articulate:

“My little one!”

Tears rolled down her cheeks. I took her hand and helped her to her feet. She made her way into the inner rooms slowly, painfully, there to make ready the bed that was to receive the remains of her child. This done, the stretcher-bearers took up their burden and laid it in the stable, which was spotlessly clean, for the cows were up in the mountains, and only the mule remained. One of the great press-beds had been opened, and white sheets showed through the covering. On this they laid the body. On the table they put lighted candles, and in the holy-water vase was a sprig of box-wood. One after another the stretcher-bearers sprinkled the body with holy-water and left, their assistants following their example.

The family having received its dead, Pétronille laid out the body with loving care, washing the scarred face and arranging the beard which was covered with the clay of the river-bed. His hands she crossed over a chaplet of beads, tied his cravat in a neat bow, and pulled the upper sheet over the arms. Meantime Maddalena continued to sob, not once offering to help her aged mother-in-law. I turned round and caught sight

of little Jean-Marie: he was so terrified that I offered to take charge of him.

"Let me have him. I'll take his brother and sister, too. I'll keep them occupied and bring them back in time for the funeral."

"You won't take me," said the independent Etienne, who was now seventeen and as tall as a man.

"And you won't take me either," echoed the quiet little Rina, who followed her brother's example in all things.

Nor would the youngest allow me to take him. I was, however able to divert his attention by promising to shoot my rifle. I took him by the hand and we walked to the inn where I had taken a room.

I had no intention of returning to my mountain lodge. The hunting season was practically over and besides, I felt I owed it to the family not to desert them in their hour of need.

Claude's death was purely an accident. I was in no doubt as to that. After selling his chamois he had dined at the inn and probably wined too well by way of celebrating the conclusion of a satisfactory bargain. And then the storm had broken. He had waited until the worst was over and set out—after midnight. Perhaps the wind had blown out his lantern and Claude, a little unsteady on his legs, had lost his way and fallen

into the stream. That was how I reconstructed the catastrophe.

But the people of Bonneval were unwilling to accept this version: they admitted he had sold his chamois—twenty sous a pound was the price: three Napoleons in all. But it was remembered that he was quite sober—his sobriety was even remarked by his friends. He had seemed anxious to start off immediately for Bessans, whence he would push on again up to La Lombarde to be in time for the morning's hunt. "I've promised," he had said. He had been vexed at the delay occasioned by the storm and the moment rain and wind had abated set forth with his dog and mule. As regards his lantern, it was no wind that blew that out: it was found by the roadside, *smashed to bits*.

"Now that's a sample of your Maurienne imagination," I thought to myself. "They are not satisfied to accept the hypothesis of an accident; they suspect crime in everything."

And yet, as I busied myself with the affairs of the family and made preparations for the funeral, I could not resist the temptation of glancing now and then at the body of my dead companion and examining his face with a certain attention. During one of these brief examinations I detected on the neck a few very faint marks; I bent over, untied the cravat, loosened the collar, and was shocked to discover more marks, unmistakable

finger marks. Was it possible that Claude had been strangled?

Old Pétronille and Maddalena had followed every movement I made without uttering a sound. The older woman was apprehensive, the younger outraged.

"We must summon the mayor," I said brusquely.

"The law won't bring him to life again," said the bereaved mother.

"Let him be," agreed the wife, and went on with her lamentations.

I understood them both and sympathized with the grief of the one and the outraged feelings of the other. The endless lawsuits in which Jean-Pierre had engaged were of interest to no one but himself: to his family they meant nothing but unhappiness and debts. It is not without good reason that women fear lawyers, for they know intuitively that the weight of the law always falls on the weakest, that it pries into their past, discovering evidence of evil intentions, suspicious relationships and dark deeds, thus compromising them under pretence of safeguarding their interests. I am too well acquainted with criminal procedure not to understand the instinctive horror these women felt. But, after all, if Claude had been murdered, was it not my duty to see to it that his murderer was punished?

Meantime Jean-Pierre drew near. He stood up

to his full height and assumed his most dignified air. He had been following the scene from a distance.

"Monsieur l'Avocat, you are right," he said peremptorily, "he can't be buried without an inquest. The mayor must be sent for."

I made off at once, and the mayor, who shared my suspicions, telegraphed on my advice to the district court at Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne. After which, and again on my advice, he did what the peasants, owing to a fine feeling of delicacy, had kept him from doing: went through Claude's pockets. His search revealed many devices necessary for a life in the mountains: a knife, a leather drinking-cup, scissors, a thimble, a steel case full of needles, string, and the like, and finally the sixty francs he had received from the sale of the chamois, less three francs which he had evidently spent at the inn. The smallness of this sum was sufficient proof that my beater had not been drunk enough to affect him. If murder it was, the motive could not have been robbery.

These facts once established, there was nothing left to do but to put the body in a coffin, but the mayor refused to permit burial; the District Attorney, who had to come from some distance, could not arrive until the following morning, and the funeral was therefore postponed until the day after that.

The Attorney's physician and the Examining

Judge were in no doubt whatsoever as to the nature of the marks I had discovered: Claude Couvert had been strangled, and the hand that strangled him was an exceptionally strong one. For a while after strangulation the water had attenuated the marks of ecchymosis, but these had returned shortly after with unmistakable clearness. The Judge took my deposition, which was of little use to him in furnishing a clue, for I could not name anyone who was on bad terms with Claude. Perhaps there might have been some poacher, jealous of Claude's exploits, or the marked preference I showed for him? I recalled the laughter and the equivocal remarks of the beaters up at the châlet whenever I referred to Claude's passing the night at Bonneval.

The funeral was an imposing ceremony, for news of Claude's death had spread throughout the Valley. The entire population of Bessans was present, and many had come from Bonneval and even from Lanslevillard. Folk from the little mountain hamlets, Pierre-Grosse and Averole, had come down on asses and mules, as they were wont to go to religious festivals.

"The murderer must be there among all those people," said the Judge to me in a whisper as he saw the vast assemblage.

"Unless," I returned, "he has gone over the mountains into Italy."

"He might do that if he were a thief, but if it

was revenge, he wouldn't. A Mauriennais would be too proud to run away if he considered he had merely exercised his right."

"But he won't give himself up."

"Sooner or later every criminal is discovered. That has been my experience. Joseph de Maistre is absolutely right."

I knew the passage he referred to, and more than once during my legal career I had pondered over it. On my return to Chambéry I opened a copy of the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, and turned to this sentence: "It is an invariable fact that there is on earth a universal and invisible order for the temporal punishment of crime. I must once again repeat that criminals escape the hand of justice much less frequently than is commonly believed, for their discovery is often a result merely of the application of a theory or else of the infinite precautions taken by the culprit to escape discovery. There is often in the circumstances surrounding the discovery of the cleverest criminals an element so unexpected, so surprising, so *unforseeable*, that those who are called upon to deal in matters of this sort come to believe that the dispensers of human justice are endowed with superhuman powers."

Meantime I left the Examining Judge to make his professional investigation and went to join the family. I insisted on considering myself one of them, and took my place at their side during

the funeral. In the procession I was directly behind the group comprising the father, the two sons and the brother of Claude. Old Jean-Pierre walked with head erect; his face was the image of despair, but he was doing his utmost to conceal every indication of senility and sorrow in order to be a credit to the son who had been struck down, and to show the world that he was himself quite able to punish the murderer. There was no pose in his magnificently paternal manner: it was simply the affirmative gesture of a man accustomed to hold his own and stand firmly upon his rights. The children, giving in to their feelings in a more natural manner, wept with the women; for Claude had been the life and soul of the house with his never-wearying vivacity, his joyous grimaces, and his jokes. Benoît, who had come down from the mountain for the day was as usual silent and impenetrable. But I could see that under his mask he was deeply moved, and I was sorry I had suspected him of jealousy.

The women gathered together in a group at one side. Maddalena had shrieked so loudly that it was necessary to leave her at home for fear she would interrupt the service. But Pétronille had courageously marched in the procession, holding little Rina by the hand. She bore her grief with the utmost simplicity, exactly as she was used to perform the tasks of her every-day existence.

When we had reached the church and stood facing the entrance I turned round to see that mass of human beings, a solid phalanx in black, marching up the steep proclivity. The women, in their long, trailing gowns and black head-dresses, reminded me of nuns in a solemn procession. There was no sign of a colored ribbon even among the young girls. Like the mourners of antiquity these women occasionally uttered a prolonged wail like the wail of the night-owl.

The next day I returned to Chambéry, but before I left I made Jean-Pierre promise to keep me informed of any new developments.

## CHAPTER III

### OUR LORD IN THE STABLE

DURING the autumn and winter following the murder I received two or three visits from Jean-Pierre Couvert; but he brought me no new facts regarding the investigation following the inquest which was, it appeared, the usual perfunctory formality. I wondered, as I took note of his altered expression, his red face and watery eyes, whether he had not taken advantage of these visits to leave home in order to carouse as much as he liked? Of course he had always been fond of wine, but he carried his drink as every good Savoyard prides himself on doing, and never got really drunk. But now the old man seemed to have succumbed.

“How goes it up in your part of the country, Jean-Pierre?”

“Oh, same as usual, but I’ve come about the old woman.”

“Is Pétronille sick?”

“Not sick exactly. She spits blood. Seems worn out. It’s her grief. It’s killing her.”

The old man was glad of an opportunity to leave home. When one reaches a certain age one finds it increasingly difficult to bear the burdens of others.

One day I went to Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne on a case, and I asked the Judge there, Fonclair—who was just a little too much interested in local history to be a good judge—whether he had discovered any new clues. It was just as I had foreseen. The court had delved into Claude's past life, in much the same way as the magistrate had gone through his pockets. It seems that several years ago he had made love to some girl in Bonneval and probably had a child by her. Probably, I say, but this was by no means certain, for she was not a vestal; certain it is that many men had had relations with her. She married later and her husband had legitimatized the child. Could the belated jealousy of this man be seized upon as a valid clue? The court had indeed followed it up for a time and then dropped it: the fellow was too simple-minded, and his wife ruled him with an iron hand. He even had no doubts regarding the paternity of the child, and was known to be peaceable and friendly on all occasions. And yet this long-forgotten story occasioned more gaiety on the part of my beaters than had my announcement of Claude's trip to Bonneval. Such tales are very slow to start in these regions, but they die hard.

The Judge, realizing that he could not discover anything particularly discreditable to the victim's moral character, had turned his attention to that little secret world of smuggling and

poaching, a world into which an outsider may enter only at the risk of his life. But the judge knew this world, every by-path in it: he had crossed the frontier over passes that were ordinarily considered impossible; he knew its secret hiding-places, was intimate with its manners and customs, and its code of honor, and consequently, he understood its laws and its vengeances. The investigation was made with infinite precaution and tact. Claude, of course, knew that world and frequented every nook and corner of it: he hunted chamois out of season and knew where to sell his game at the highest price. He was invaluable as a guide because of his inexhaustible knowledge of every part of the mountains. He had friends and allies at Ceresole in Italy and without doubt he transported contraband goods to that place. Possibly he had quarrelled with one of his accomplices? Maybe he had blabbed and compromised a pal? The court had even decided to arrest one of the most notorious smugglers, a man who had once been sentenced because of a row at the inn where he had put out the eye of a customs officer. Pierre-Paul Poing of Bonneval was celebrated for his physical strength and his ugly temper. He was rather irritated when they came to arrest him, so that it was necessary to send a whole squad of police to carry him off. What particularly aroused his ire was that he should be sus-

pected of committing a crime in the dead of night —a cowardly act! His innocence was soon established, and he was released.

“I did not bring charges against him,” explained the Judge.

“What sort of charges could you have brought?”

“Resisting the police; assault and battery.”

“But he was innocent!”

“That’s no reason. Do you think we arrest only the guilty? You can’t know until afterward. Besides, we had to do something for the sake of the lawyers.”

“Thanks; your blunders are quite sufficient. Meantime, have you any fresh clues?”

“Yes, a better one. I’m very glad you came. I want to ask you a few questions. How many beaters did you have when you went hunting at La Lombarde?”

“Four, not counting Claude Couvert.”

“Weren’t they all jealous of him?”

“Yes, but they were very decent fellows.”

“A judge takes no account of ‘decent fellows.’ All that’s necessary is to arrest one of them and find out a few things about his private life. That’ll bring to light any amount of moral turpitude.”

“You’re a dangerous man.”

“No man is more dangerous than a judge.”

“So I see. But may I point out that while moral turpitude, as you phrase it, is a human at-

tribute, it does not bear the same relation to society at large as does actual crime."

"But it's only a step from that to crime."

"A very long step—often a step that is practically impossible to take."

"Impossible? I have just read Joseph de Maistre and I see he condoned judicial errors on the ground that when justice was mistaken the victim in suffering punishment was thus expiating another, an unknown crime."

"Ah, but you twist the author's meaning. Recall for a moment that other passage you quoted at Bessans during the funeral, about the universal and visible order for the temporal punishment of crime, and the cleverest criminals sooner or later disclosing their guilt by imprudence."

"Yes. Sometimes they are a long time doing it, and show no consideration for the judges. That is why they force us to adopt any means at hand."

"That's small consolation for the good, law-abiding citizens!"

"People don't properly understand the attitude of judges. We work in the dark. It is inevitable that we should make others suffer."

"But you ought to do your best to minimize that suffering."

"I do my best, but a magistrate owes it to himself to have an easy conscience. He must not permit himself over-refined scruples."

Judge Fonclair is a very able man, a lover of paradox, and always delights in showing off his erudition.

He is endowed with sufficient irony and scepticism to prevent his being absolutely stupid, and as a result of his vast experience he can make shrewd guesses. But in the Couvert case he was quite beyond his depth, utterly at sea, as I realized when he announced the following hypothesis:

"Let us return to our beaters," he said. "Claude Couvert enjoys your confidence. A remarkable fellow; knows all the hiding-places of the chamois; is better than all the rest in discovering game. A wonderful cook. In every way a keen, fine, fearless fellow. When he is about, everything runs smoothly—nothing is lacking. Every day he entertains you with all sorts of amusing rigmaroles. In your little community he is by all odds the favorite. You give him more game than the others."

"How do you know?"

"I've investigated. His four comrades begin to rebel; they decide to get rid of him. Finally, you make him a present of a fat young chamois at a time when the guests at the inn are clamoring for chamois meat. He takes the animal down to Bonneval. The gang chooses his executioner, or executioners as the case may be. At night he, or they, slip away from La Lombarde and lie in wait somewhere on the road between Bonneval

and Bessans—between the châlets of Barmanère and the bridge where the road crosses the river. The little dog of course recognizes the men, and naturally doesn't bark at them. Remember, the people at Barmanère heard no barking! They strangle Claude and throw his body into the river. Then, under cover of the night, they return to the châlet. The trip down and back is nothing to men who are used to the mountains. In the morning they are ready for the hunt as if nothing had happened. Who could suspect them?"

"Well, you were quite right when you said that a judge is a dangerous man! You've just constructed a more astonishing piece of fiction than was ever conceived by a popular novelist. I admit my beaters were jealous of Claude, but that was a purely professional jealousy—not the sort that leads to crime. There is no possible connection between the cause and the result you imagine. My men realized Claude's superiority, though they would not admit it even to themselves, and they might conceivably have gotten together to play a practical joke on him, but the joke would have gone no further than sending him off on a false scent. So much for the 'morality' of my men. And that is enough for me. Let me point out that there are any number of material objections to your version."

"For instance?"

"First, the matter of distance. It's at least

three hours' walk from my châlet to Bonneval."

"But Claude evidently thought he could make it—and even in shorter time?"

"Have patience, Judge, Claude Couvert left between four and five in the afternoon. He intended to return during the night. My men were all at the châlet for dinner, and after dinner I talked with them about the next day's hunt."

"They're very fast walkers, you know!"

"You forget the storm. It broke out between eight and nine that night and was particularly violent. Not even a customs officer would think of leaving his door in such a storm."

"These mountaineers are afraid of nothing."

"Note that it was so severe that Claude was forced to remain at Bonneval till midnight."

"He stopped at the inn because of the mule. You know, these peasants take better care of their animals than of themselves."

"But why do you assume that the dog did not bark? Naturally, he couldn't be heard at Barmanère because of the roaring of the river."

"People living near rivers become accustomed to the sound and hear other sounds quite distinctly."

"You're very hard to convince. But since you won't otherwise believe in the innocence of my men, let me give you one incontrovertible proof."

"Well, well, this sounds like a court plea. Let

us have your incontrovertible proof. I ask nothing better than to believe it. I'm not prejudiced."

"My men did not leave La Lombarde at all that night. And my proof is that if they had gone on this wild expedition their clothes would have been soaked. As a matter of fact, they were quite dry."

"They might have changed?"

"They had no others."

"What do they do when they get wet?"

"Dry them in the sun if it shines again; otherwise, at the fire."

"Well, I admit that is a reason. Still, I would like to arrest one of them."

"But why?"

"To make the others talk. In these rural districts, no one opens his mouth until one of them is behind the bars."

"Don't arrest anyone. Take my advice."

"Too bad! It's really a shame!"

After thus expressing his regret Fonclair burst into laughter which scarcely concealed his rage. For a moment I suspected that he might have been joking, but I learned during the more friendly conversation that followed that he was in deadly earnest, and had actually investigated the past lives of my beaters. My statement alone had prevented his making an arrest. But he believed me implicitly. So you see, my trip to Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne was not in vain, for it served to shield

the innocent. They were of course honest men, easily distinguishable, the Judge notwithstanding, from criminals.

If I go to such pains in going over the details of this conversation, it is by no means for the purpose of emphasizing my rôle as protector of the innocent. On the contrary, for the false, though ingenious, hypothesis of the Judge enabled me to make good use of his ideas at a later time in order to strengthen a totally different conviction that had come to me.

During the month of the following February some of my friends at Chambéry organized a skiing party through the Maurienne. They planned to go by train to Modane and then proceed by sleds up the Valley of the Arc to Bonneval where a châlet-refuge had just been opened by the Alpine Club. The return trip was to be made on skis: there were wonderful slopes, they knew, at La Madeleine above Lanslevillard. Though I was especially busy at the time I joined the party; two or three days spent in the open air would drive the legal cobwebs from my mind. Besides, I could stop off at Bessans and visit the Couverts.

Those who have never made a sojourn in the mountains during the winter can have no conception of their grandeur. Some traveller—I don't know who it was—whose appetite for sensation had lost its edge, declared that each country

ought to be visited during what he called its “violent” season; the Orient under the blasting heat of midsummer, the Scandinavian countries in the dead of winter, and so on. This is especially true of the mountains. There the winter is by no means what you might imagine it to be: the sun, for instance, shines oftener than it does on the plains and in the valleys. How many times as I sat in my office at Chambéry have my mountaineer clients pitied me because of the fogs that continually hid the sky from my view!

“Up where we live, Monsieur l’Avocat, we have clear weather.”

And what crystal clarity it is! A horizon of pure white and azure, not your ordinary white and azure: the white up there glistens like new armor; luminous, living, quickened into life by the blinding sunlight. The snow bursts into clouds of innumerable diamonds. And the blue! It is dense and yet light, deep and at the same time unbelievably delicate; more tenuous than the sky of Italy, and yet darker than that of the Ile-de-France. Under this mantle of blue and white the mountains reveal their magnificent outlines, now soft and smooth, now awful in their rugged abruptness. Under a shifting atmosphere these outlines at times stand out in every detail, and again become attenuated and lost in the ever-shifting mists. The pines and larches, laden with hoar-frost, show touches of vivid green or golden

brown. A church steeple in the distance marks the position of a silent village tucked away in a corner of the valley. Everywhere is the sweet silence of a lonely monastery. This world of white knows no monotony, since the vivid light darts and changes with each floating mist. The morning is full of golds and pinks, and you might imagine you were present at the birth of some Alpine goddess, sprung from the glacier, like Venus rising from the sea. The evenings are still more beautiful: there is a profusion of soft tints, beginning with the deepest orange and melting into every variety of red—crimson, carmine, copper; and then through all the yellows—sulphur, saffron, light lemon; and at last passing into the violets, lilacs, and mauves. No painter has ever been able to render this ever-changing fusion of colors, more delicately and subtly shaded than the petals of roses and chrysanthemums.

But there are other pleasures besides the visual. A fresh and salubrious wind caresses the face and sends the blood coursing through the body. There is no exercise more agreeable, more voluptuous, than skating or skiing, for in these sports you feel an inner heat contrasting pleasantly with the cold air. In no other way is it possible to feel so close to nature and life.

The winter is by no means a sad season in the mountain regions. Think of the long evenings indoors! It is then that traditions are

handed down, one generation learning from the other the history of the race in the form of legends, which of course are the truest sort of history. It is then that the character is formed, the soul shaped, and first love born. The girls of the Maurienne, I may say, are particularly pretty.

We spent the night at Lanslebourg in order to rest our mules. My companions were anxious to reach Bonneval in time for lunch. We started out early the next morning, but experienced some difficulty in crossing the pass at La Madeleine, which lies between Lanslevillard and Bessans. The trail had disappeared and our animals sank into the new snow up to their bellies. We had to dismount and pull the animals out.

We arrived at Bessans about noon and decided to eat there. After lunch my companions proceeded on their way while I remained behind. We had agreed that they were to call for me on their return. Meantime I engaged a room at the inn. Now that Claude was gone, I hesitated to accept the hospitality of the Couverts, though I presented myself at the house immediately after the skiing party had left.

Jean-Pierre's fears on behalf of his wife's health were by no means unfounded. When I entered the stable I saw Pétronille lying in bed, her hands folded over the sheet, surrounded by the animals in their stalls, and the children. The

fact that she had consented to go to bed at all sufficed to show that there was no hope of her recovery. She was one of those women who positively refuse to be sick, but when once they are stricken, never recover. A sunbeam coming in through one of the windows illuminated the center of the scene. I can still see the mule and the broad haunches of the cows; I even remember that the stalls had not been cleaned out, an ominous detail, for I knew that no house, as a rule, was cleaner than this. The cows still wore their bells and from time to time their slow movements sent out silvery sounds on two or three notes, mingling pleasantly with the conversation or startling the silence. A hen, making her way into forbidden territory, paraded back and forth, picking up crumbs and grain. Coal, the little black dog, was curled up in a corner sleeping a troubled sleep. He occasionally uttered a little yelp and relapsed into silence. Perhaps he felt the presence of the Unknown Guest.

The dying woman was cared for by her grandson, Etienne, and by little Rina, who supplied her with sugar-water and rum, and occasionally gave her a teaspoonful of Bonjean Elixir, the universal Savoyard remedy for the "restoration of strength and immediate relief of all pain." They stood with eyes fixed upon her, endeavoring to guess her wishes, never leaving her side for a moment. I felt a genuine admiration for this tall youth of

seventeen or eighteen, as tenderly attentive as a young nurse learning her profession. At that time I perceived some indication of what his future was to be: there was in him none of the awkwardness or boorishness of the typical countryman. He was delicate and refined in manner. Poor boy! What an ordeal he was to undergo before entering the priesthood! His sister, who had already attached herself to him like a servant and sought to emulate him in every respect, was also to seek refuge later on from the world. Jean-Pierre was seated at the table. He was showing Jean-Marie, the youngest of his grandsons, how to carve wood after the fashion of Clapier and Vincendet, local sculptors of a bygone day, into the semblance of saints, soldiers, and devils. Before him on the table was a jug which I thought at first was full of wine or cider. I was wrong, for it contained mountain thistles which the old man had gathered in order to put beneath a little photograph of Claude that hung on the wall. His memory was sacred in this house, and its celebration was a religious cult.

I inquired after Maddalena: she had taken charge of the kitchen as well as of the entire household. As for Benoît, I could hear him sawing wood in the wood-shed: the cold weather would necessitate a large supply of ash and beech, pine and larch.

After paying my respects to the others I went

to Pétronille, uncertain whether my speaking would agitate her. But Etienne reassured me with these words, which later assumed a meaning he could not possibly have intended:

"You may speak, Monsieur. She hears everything, sees everything, knows everything."

Thank God, she did not *know* everything!

Her quickly failing eyes had already taken account of my presence. She greeted me and called me by name: "How do you do, Monsieur Charlieu," and seemed anxious to know if I were well lodged and nourished. She received me in the manner of a great lady or rather with the ceremonious gravity which distinguishes peasant hospitality in this region. I suggested the advisability of sending to Lanslebourg for a doctor, but she politely refused. I remember her exact reply:

"No thank you, except for accidents, we can die without help from anyone."

There was no trace of malice in this. The "accident" she referred to was, of course, Claude's accident. During the course of my life I have seen many people face death with courage and even contempt, but only on one other occasion with such serenity. That was an old friend of my father's a man of unshaken faith, a judge who, after his retirement, had devoted his lively and energetic mind to the study of theology. When he realized that his last moment was at hand he said with the utmost coolness and detachment: "I

have always wondered just how the soul takes flight from the body. Now I shall know."

The knowledge he was about to acquire is paid for, however, only with life. Human beings as a rule do not approach this knowledge without agony, but Pétronille, happy in her ignorance, was not troubled. She went out to meet death very much as she was wont to go back and forth through the house noiselessly and discreetly, performing each task at its appointed time and performing it well. Of her own accord she asked for the priest and his sacraments, and preparing to receive into her house the symbols of God, she ordered the animals curried, the room set in order, and a clean cloth, two candlesticks, and new candles, to be laid on the table. While Rina went to fetch the white cloth the old lady asked the others to take down two clean sheets. The use to which these would be put was unmistakable. These preliminaries over, she sent little Jean-Marie for Monsieur le Curé, then lay back and made no further reply to us, as if she had already begun to accustom herself to another existence.

The priest, clothed in his surplice, and preceded by his assistant, showed not the slightest astonishment at seeing his parishioner in the presence of the animals. He took the holy Elements, pronounced the sacramental words and, approaching the bed, held the Host to the lips of the dying

woman, who received it with closed eyes, in a sort of ecstasy, as if she were offering up her very soul. The face of Pétronille, attenuated by the ravages of an incurable malady, was now transfigured and spiritualized. It bore a striking resemblance to those crude rustic madonnas you may see, painted by the local artists, on the walls of the Chapel of St. Anthony at Bessans or of St. Sebastian at Lanslevillard. Because of this resemblance I almost expected to see a halo round her head, as she lay there receiving the communion. The cows, unaccustomed to the unusual proceedings, shook their little bells as if they were announcing to the faithful the moment of the Elevation of the Host.

The picture before me, a spectacle as old as time, inevitably called to mind the birth of Jesus in the stable, in the presence of an ass and an ox and humble shepherds. Jesus in His turn had now come into the presence of one of His flock and behold, this stable was transfigured and was become the House of God.

The sacred ointments were applied to the eyes, the ears, the nostrils, and the mouth that was now shrunk to a small and delicate bloodless line, to her hands that were worn and cracked by constant use, to her feet that for so many years had taken her nowhere outside the house save to church. By the application of this Unction her human errors were forgiven, while the ointment

symbolized the consecration of her soul. Actually, however, her soul was offered up to God in expiation. *In expiation*, mark you, for this poor woman had asked, while still in full possession of her mental powers and before the lapse into unconsciousness, to receive Extreme Unction. I am positive that she realized the efficacy of this last sacrament. She received it with such fervor, with a self-abandonment so complete, that we feared the effort would precipitate instant death.

After speaking a few words of consolation and hope, the priest left, and for a long time Pétronille lay prostrate. Finally she called to her bedside her son Benoît and Claude's wife, Maddalena. These two had stood apart during the last scene, busied with their domestic duties. Food must be prepared and wood cut even in such solemn hours. They had been quietly performing their duties, relieving the others of petty details and allowing them to care for the dying woman. They answered her summons and stood facing her on either side of the bed, awkward and ill at ease. I was astonished by their pallor and the trembling of their hands. Occupied as they had been in other parts of the house, they were now doubtless shocked by the rapid progress of Pétronille's malady. She appeared not to see them.

“I am here,” said Benoît.

Then she opened her eyes which had that terrifying expression we see in the dying, who ap-

pear to be making a final effort to cling to this life while their vision is already fixed upon a world beyond.

She managed to look them both straight in the eyes, but I noticed that they could not sustain her glance, and turned their heads aside. I admit that even I, an outsider, could scarcely have borne that look without flinching. Her face was contorted and it seemed for a moment as though the pain would make her scream—a woman who had never uttered a complaint. She lifted an arm but had to let it fall, for she was in a state bordering upon prostration. The next moment she took Benoît's hand in an unexpectedly firm grip, and tried with her other hand to take hold of Maddalena's. Her son and daughter-in-law did not immediately respond to Pétronille's unspoken desire. The hand which had sought Maddalena's fell back powerless on the sheet.

What had that gesture meant? I imagined that before leaving her family she had been seized with a desire to pronounce some benediction of peace, addressing herself especially to her son and to Claude's widow, on account of the hostility that existed between the two. This was what I made of the scene at the time. Now that I know, this supreme effort of a woman who had divined only a part of the truth, who had striven on the brink of the grave to effect an impossible reparation, now assumes a grandeur comparable,

I think, only to the miracles of the Saints. What tortures would she not have suffered if she had guessed all! I left the stable full of the deepest veneration for her. Every detail of that scene is still vivid to me. Even now, after so many years, I am stirred whenever I think of her, because I have learned how far the fear of sin and the love of God can penetrate into the soul of a woman.

She spoke few words after that, but though her mouth was closed she continued to make the sign of the cross with her gnarled hand.

She did not die until two days later. I had left the evening before, promising to return in the autumn to hunt chamois. Either Benoît or Etienne, who was now a fine stalwart lad, would come with me. Someone is always found to take the place of the dead.

## CHAPTER IV

### A BELATED VOCATION

ELEVEN months had passed since the death of Claude Couvert, and six since that of his mother.

The hunting season was about to open, I had made the usual preparations and even written to Bessans to make sure that either Benoît or Etienne would be with me at the châlet, when I received a visit from Jean-Pierre, who had not left the mountains since his wife's death.

"Well, here you are at last!" I exclaimed as the old man entered my office. "I haven't seen you for ages. What have you been doing with yourself? You have brought me no new suits, done no traveling, and evidently managed to keep away from the bottle! You must be growing old, Jean-Pierre!"

As I joked with him I was shocked by the marked change in his face and manner. This proud and majestic peasant, a born leader and master who walked with head erect, wore his clothes in the grand manner and always shaved with the most scrupulous care, now stood before me a bent and pathetic old man. This venerable patriarch, for years an absolute master in his own

home and lord of his lands, only too ready to do battle in defence of his boundaries, his rights of way, his water franchises, eager to exercise every privilege to its utmost limit, was now simply an old man, whose clothes hung like bags from his shrunken body. His beard was unkempt, his nose red, his eyes dull. He was perhaps sixty-five, certainly not a day over seventy, but he carried his years as if they had been an imponderable burden that was crushing him. To what was I to attribute this change? To sorrow, or to drink? At first I put it down to drink because of the color of his face, and more especially to the trembling of his hands. But those shifting pathetic eyes, that seemed almost to express fear, no longer looked straight at one, and I suspected the presence of some agony undermining his spiritual being. Doubtless the double loss of son and wife was the cause of this tragic deterioration. He was like a magnificent tree, decayed and ready to fall before the first wind.

I inquired after the whole family, and his report was in every way satisfactory. Benoît was up in the Averole Valley tending the cattle. Etienne, he said, would be my companion at La Lombarde. This lad was as quick as his father, as ready with his hands, and as untiring. But his knowledge of the haunts and habits of animals was by no means as thorough. And, last but not least, he lacked his father's sense of fun.

"Sorrow is also affecting him," said the old man.

"He will get over it; young people do."

"Oh, he has the mind of a much older man."

In this last statement I recognized the Jean-Pierre I had always known, a keen observer, able to reduce his judgments to the most concise and exact form. His mind had remained unaffected. He lost no time in explaining the purpose of his visit. He had come to consult me about the disposition of his worldly goods and asked me what he ought to do.

"You have two children, Jean-Pierre."

"I did have four. Now I have only one."

"Legally you have two: Claude's interests are represented by his children. You have therefore the right to dispose of only a third of your property."

"Then I'll make a will in favor of my grandson Etienne. You see, Benoît is single."

It was quite natural. In this way he had provided for the future of the family and at the same time perpetuated the custom of primogeniture.

"But," I objected, "Benoît is not old; he may marry yet."

"Oh, no."

This "No" came from him in a flash as if the old man were indignantly protesting against the bare possibility. I took it that having once

made up his mind, he was unwilling to alter it.

"But why give to Etienne at the expense of Rina and Jean-Marie?"

"Oh, Rina——"

Rina of course was only a girl. In the country girls are not reckoned when you count the children. But little Jean-Marie? Jean-Pierre looked at me and upon my word I think he was afraid.

"Etienne is the oldest," he declared as if he were laying down the law.

I advised him not to dispose of his property before he died, sound advice, by the way. I have too often beheld the spectacle of an old man despised, abandoned, and destitute, the moment he has given away his property. Such a man is considered merely a-parasite, consuming without producing, a superfluous creature who has outlived his time. For country people (though I have known striking exceptions) to honor their father and their mother when it is no longer a matter of material interest, is not usual.

Jean-Pierre allowed me to speak without interruption, and when I had finished, he added:

"Yes, I understand, but you see I'm going away."

Where could he be going? I asked him, and he made a vague gesture.

"Over there."

I pretended to be satisfied with this answer, for he evidently felt he could not yet trust me.

"How long are you going to be away?"

"Always."

What the devil did he mean by these mysterious words? Surely he didn't intend, at his age, to begin life over again elsewhere, especially after giving up his property? I was well aware that in the Maurienne, where witchcraft and sorcery are accepted as facts and the peasant imagination is always evolving the most extraordinary ideas, nothing ought to surprise me. Crusading emigrants were common: many of them had already gone to America. Long lines of conquerors passing through the country had left in it some of the ambition and desire for gain that had actuated them. Had the old man succumbed to some folly of this sort? I was on fairly intimate terms with him, and believed I had a right to insist:

"Come, now, Jean-Pierre, don't you care to tell me where you're going?"

His little smile changed to a savage grimace that made him look twenty years younger. It was the cunning smile of the child who plays a trick or jumps over the school-house wall.

"It's a secret."

"They don't know it at home?"

"No. Women blab."

This, I knew, was a reference to Maddalena.

Perhaps that strange woman had again taken up her pious pilgrimages?

"You're mighty mysterious, Jean-Pierre. So you mean to tell me your children have seen the last of you in Bessans, and don't even know where you have gone? You wouldn't play a trick like that! Remember the day you waited for Claude to return. Don't *you* cause the same anxiety to the others."

My allusion produced a more powerful effect than I had hoped for, and the old man's hands trembled more violently than before. But he attempted to defend himself:

"Who's waiting for me? The wife's in peace."

"Your son Benoît. And Claude's three children—and Maddalena."

He seemed for a moment to weigh the words: only one name interested him.

"All right then, I'll write to Etienne."

Perceiving the full extent of my sympathy for him, Jean-Pierre then decided to reveal his extraordinary secret.

"I'll tell you: I'm going to Hautecombe."

Hautecombe, on the banks of Lake Le Bourget, is the burying-ground of the Princes of the House of Savoy. The church is a huge commonplace structure with a tower. Next it are a monastery and cloister, and a chapel with the royal tombs. What was the old peasant planning to do in this retreat? I couldn't believe my ears.

"Oh," I said with a smile, "I know very well that the Dukes of Savoy came from the Maurienne, but I've never heard that every Maurien-nais had a right to be buried with them at Haute-combe."

"I'm not dead yet, Monsieur l'Avocat," he said, "but that's where I'm going to be buried when I am."

Having broached the secret, he seemed to have rid himself of a burden, and his former dignified manner returned to him. He seemed to enjoy telling me what was on his mind.

"Tell me, Jean-Pierre, what is there besides the tombs at Hautecombe?"

"There's the monastery."

"Do you mean to say you're going into a mon-astery? I'm blest if I ever thought you had the makings of a monk in you!"

"I couldn't very well be a monk, because I'm not educated, but I'm going to be a servant. They call *them* brothers, too."

"Yes, lay brothers. So you've taken it into your head to be a lay-brother? I can't believe it!"

"Why not?"

"Simply because you've been in the habit of commanding other people for the last fifty years, and an old general finds it rather hard to take orders."

He had risen and was now standing before me.

At that moment he was clothed with a majesty comparable only to that of his wife as she lay in the stable waiting to receive God into her presence.

"I've given away everything that belonged to me. I'm now a poor man and if I want to become a servant there's nothing to prevent me."

Become a servant at seventy! To eat the bread of others after one has enjoyed plenty during a whole lifetime! I was struck with what he said: "If I want to become a servant there's nothing to prevent me!" For one brief moment I had been ready to believe this man a drunkard, and now he calmly announced his intention of entering a monastery, after giving up all his property and sacrificing the companionship and affection of his family. If I had not known him for a native of that strange Bessans whose inhabitants claim it as the birthplace of Jesus and who for a thousand years have preserved their civilization, character and wild imagination intact, I would have thought him mad. With the utmost tranquillity he laid his entire plan before me. One of his uncles had been a Cistercian monk at the Abbey of Hautecombe, and Jean-Pierre reminding the authorities of this fact had written them offering his services. As the uncle was held in great veneration the old man's offer had been accepted.

"Are you quite sure you will not regret your decision, Jean-Pierre?"

"My mind has been at rest ever since I made it."

"It isn't an easy life. No more wine, you know?"

"The price of wine is going up; anyway, I'll learn to do without it."

"How did you discover your vocation?"

"I don't know. Perhaps my wife——?"

He could give me no satisfactory explanation. I hardly think he tried to. The vocation had simply come, and that was all there was to it.

"When do you start?"

"Right off—this afternoon—by boat. Just as soon as I've seen the notary and arranged about the will. I've kept out a little money for the notary—and for you, too, Monsieur l'Avocat." He opened his purse and was about to pay me a consultation fee when I stopped him with a wave of the hand.

"No, no, I shan't accept a sou, and I insist besides on your lunching with me, Jean-Pierre. It's your last meal in this world."

He hesitated just a moment and then accepted. A marked change had come over him since he began telling his secret: he was now cordial, frank, almost care-free.

"Just as you say. I'll see the notary and come back in a couple of hours."

After he left I hurried to the kitchen in order to effect several changes in my menu. Nothing

would be too good for the man who was on the point of renouncing riches, power and worldly position. My cook was in a flurry, and must have thought I had asked some prince to lunch. I instructed her to buy the finest provisions at the best shops. She returned with Lake Le Bourget herrings, game out of season, one of those indescribable pâtés for which Chambéry is justly celebrated, and a *Sambaglione à l'Italienne*. I myself descended to the cellar and selected several bottles of the finest Savoy wines—white Chignin whose bouquet is like a flower, which sparkles like golden Champagne, and is as fresh and stimulating as a sunrise on the snow; and red Saint-Jean-de-la-Porte, as solid as the best Burgundy; old Montmélian, bottled half a century ago, a wine to be treated with respect and ceremonious unction as you would a lord of some bygone age. We have excellent vintages in Savoy, quite unknown beyond the border, as the supply is strictly limited.

I myself selected the appropriate glasses. When my old servant heard the bell ring she could not resist the temptation of opening the kitchen door for a glimpse of the royal guest. I looked at her in amusement, permitting myself this additional liberty, for I had already invaded her dominion in order to supervise the mixing of the sauces.

“It’s only another client,” grumbled the disappointed parlor-maid as she ushered in Jean-

Pierre. "He'll keep lunch waiting. It's a shame we never can have meals on time!"

"But, Fanchette, this is he!"

"A peasant!"

"Exactly. He is my guest. I cannot do him enough honor."

Of course she thought I had gone raving mad, and but for her professional pride she would no doubt have refused to serve the rarer delicacies that had been prepared. Still, I must do my cook the justice of stating that she distinguished herself; I am quite unable to determine which was her masterpiece, the creamy Hollandaise served with the herring, the unimpeachable partridge dressing, or the sauce that went with the *Sambaglione*. Jean-Pierre ate and drank like—I was going to say "like a monk," but the comparison would be unjust both to my guest and to the monk—so I will say "like a true Savoyard." Under the influence of good food and wine the old man was completely transformed. I saw him as I had often seen him in former years, his mouth puckered and his eyes full of malice, as when he left the court-house like a dramatist who had just seen a performance of his own play. He seemed to have forgotten all about his pious vocation. He was at this moment free of cares and though he was on the point of entering a life of self-abnegation he was at least beginning his pilgrimage on a full stomach. Here I was offering him every variety

of food and surrounding him with a veritable army of wine-glasses. He partook of everything that was set before him, and of course he was an expert in wines. I was just a little taken aback at this self-indulgence, but I was gratified, and told him so:

“We are burying your earthly existence,” I said.

“And royally, Monsieur l’Avocat, you might add.”

“And you’re sure you won’t miss all this on your visit at Hautecombe?”

“My visit!”

“Yes, your—whatever you choose to call it.”

“You can get used to any change so long as it comes all at once, and not little by little.”

“Tell me, now, just what you intend doing up there?”

“Do as I’m told to do.”

“Do what you’re told to do? But you’ve always been the one to give orders to other people!”

“That’s just it: you’re happy when you don’t have to give orders to other people.”

“But you’ve not prepared yourself for this life.”

“Oh, Monsieur l’Avocat, you don’t need preparation to learn to pick vegetables, wash lettuce, or clean pots. Any *woman* can do that!”

“But you’re not a woman.”

“I’ve done hard work in my day.”

It was clear that he had definitely made up his mind: his decision was irrevocable, because it was based on excellent reasons, which I was not to know until long afterward. As he had eaten and drunk as much as he cared for, I ventured for the last time to ask news of the murder case. I wished to know whether before leaving home he had assured himself that nothing more remained to do, that every clue had been run down and the law satisfied so far as was humanly possible. It seemed to me that the Judge had lost interest and that the case was dragging. Had the police been keeping an eye on those suspicious-looking tramps along the Franco-Italian frontier? Was it not perhaps worth while to look for a clue among them? Had they sent detectives into the low dives of Modane and secured a writ of inquiry from the Turin courts? I asked the old man whether he didn't think it a good idea to stop over at Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne and have a talk with the Judge?

Jean-Pierre allowed me to elaborate these details without interruption as he kept his eyes fixed on a glass of Montmélian that sparkled like rubies, and then emptied it at a draught. I had an idea that he was no longer interested in avenging the murder of his son and intended to forget everything up at Hautecombe. But I was wrong.

“I’ve already been to Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne and seen the Judge.”

"And what did the Judge say?"

"He told me there was no use making any more investigations."

"No use? What on earth do you mean, Jean-Pierre? Don't you want to avenge Claude's murder?"

I noticed that he hesitated for the fraction of a moment. Then he continued with his accustomed authority:

"Claude was not murdered."

I was now absolutely dumbfounded. Claude not murdered! But with my own eyes I had seen those unmistakable marks on the boy's neck, and the Mayor had corroborated my testimony. The facts were further attested to by the medical expert and accepted without question by the court. There had been no shadow of a doubt in the minds of any of us. Jean-Pierre's wits must have been affected or else his newly revealed vocation had transformed him into an effeminate coward, ready to leave vengeance in the hands of the Lord. I looked at him across the table and I felt a little sorry for him. I filled his glass once more and again he emptied it at a gulp. Was he seeking support from the wine? Hardly, for the few bottles he had drunk were after all not much for a man of his accomplishments. It served only to loosen his tongue a little, for his remarks were those of a man in complete possession of all his faculties.

"No, Monsieur l'Avocat, it was not murder. The criminal would have been discovered. Claude hadn't one enemy in the whole Valley. You know, that story about the Guyton girl in Bonneval doesn't amount to a row of pins, and you know too those beaters of yours are decent fellows. And smugglers don't kill a man without good reason."

"It might have been somebody we never heard tell of?"

"No, no, I tell you, Claude fell into the Arc at night, and that's all there is to it. He dropped his lantern, and that's how he came to lose his way. Nobody heard the dog bark: if he had barked someone would have heard him in Barmanère. After he fell in, his neck was bruised by the bushes. I've been along there myself and seen the bushes. His body was caught in them and the current did the rest. It's only natural, don't you see, that his neck would be bruised and scratched. And that's that."

He had of course returned to the theory of accidental death which the rest of us, on discovering the bruises, had discarded once for all. He had even given this theory a new impetus. I frankly admit I was too astonished to answer, and he went on with that air of authority which he was so soon to abandon for the rest of his days:

"Those are the facts, Monsieur l'Avocat. Remember, I am telling you this, I Claude's father, and you've got to believe me. At first the Judge

wasn't sure, but I made him see. He's investigated the whole district as far as Modane without finding the ghost of a new clue—he's come back like a dog with his tail between his legs, a dog that's gone off on a false scent. First he thought I was talking nonsense, but after he heard everything I had to say, he said, 'Maybe you're right after all, Père Couvert,' and just as I was going off he said, 'Quite right, Couvert, that explains why our investigations have come to nothing.' And then he made me come in again. He told the clerk everything I'd said, and the clerk wrote it down and then I signed it."

The words "Then I signed it" were spoken in a tone so peremptory that you might have thought he was the judge pronouncing the investigations formally terminated.

Coffee and liqueurs—there was an old Aprémont among these last—had been served during the old man's recital. Jean-Pierre drank everything that was offered and refused nothing that was passed a second time. He sat smoking one of those long Italian cigars with a straw running through it, which I had offered him. He smoked it slowly and with obvious regret: it was his last smoke. He looked at the clock and rose to his feet.

"I mustn't be late for the boat."

His face, ruddy as a rock under the setting sun, his legs firmly planted on the ground, Jean-

Pierre had lost every particle of resemblance to that pathetic little man who had stood in my office a short time before. Was I to attribute this change to the food, or to his new vocation? As he stood at my door, ready to go, he turned as if he wished to impart a last confidential message.

"You're going to see Etienne up at the châlet, aren't you?"

"Surely, Jean-Pierre. I'm very glad to have him, though naturally I regret his father."

"He's a nice boy but too serious-minded."

"Too serious-minded?"

"Yes, it *got him* too soon."

"What *got him* too soon?"

He put his finger to his forehead, by which the old man meant that the lad thought more than young men of his age are apt to think. Without doubt his father's "accident"—since accident it must be considered—and his grandmother's death, had given the boy a maturity that comes only from great mental suffering.

"He has all sorts of notions—imagines things and all that. This business about his father weighs on his mind. That's bad, Monsieur l'Avocat, bad. Children oughtn't to be mixed up in those kind of things. A boy like Etienne ought to be young at his time of life, he ought to have broad shoulders like me. His shoulders aren't broad enough. I'm depending on you, Monsieur l'Avocat."

“On me?”

“Yes, to set his mind at rest. Tell him not to worry any more: it was an accident. He ought to be a boy with the other boys, have a good time and all that, don’t you think? You keep an eye on him.”

“I give you my word I will, Jean-Pierre.”

I had promised without any definite idea of what I was promising, for I saw that my guest was worried about Etienne. I saw immediately that my reply had lifted a burden from him. He took my hand, and pressing it in his callous palms, bade me good-bye.

“Thank you for everything, Monsieur l’Avocat. That was a fine dinner you gave me.”

In the country, you know, dinner is the mid-day meal. As he turned to leave it suddenly came over me that I was genuinely sorry to see him go. I called him back.

“Good-bye, Jean-Pierre!”

And—well—I kissed him! I had not before realized the depth of my affection for him, and now he was leaving me forever, to be a servant in the House of the Lord. It was at least a consolation to think that I had sent him off happy and comforted. My unexpected outburst of affection had pleased him, having instantly swept away every social barrier between us. As he turned for the last time he murmured:

“I leave the lad in your hands——”

He descended the stairs a picture of majesty in spite of his ridiculous clothes. I was to see him once again, long after, a more majestic and a more tragic figure, King Lear, but without a crown and without a daughter.

## CHAPTER V

### SUSPICION

SOME days afterward I set out for Bessans with my friend Louis de Vimines, who like myself was an enthusiastic hunter. The Couvert house had lost three of its inmates during the past year, but when I entered it there was no visible change. Maddalena had taken entire charge of the household; she was still the calm-featured madonna, keenly alert, coming and going, passing to and fro unobtrusively between kitchen and stable.

"Well, Maddalena," I said jokingly, "what about those pilgrimages of yours?"

"I don't go any more."

"Aren't you going even to La Salette? There's a great festival there in honor of Maximin and Mélanie."

This news left her cold, and I perceived that her domestic duties were now occupying all her time and attention.

"So the old man has gone?"

"He got the notion, and left."

"Did you know he was going?"

"No: he wrote Etienne."

Jean-Pierre's departure, which had to me seemed so extraordinary, appeared to have made

no stir in the family circle. How easily some seemingly difficult problems solve themselves!

“And Benoît, is he here with you?”

An indiscreet question, perhaps, but I had imagined that the absence of both the old people had created a delicate situation, for Maddalena and her brother-in-law, living together under one roof, might now require some reconciling influence or authority. Maddalena had apparently not given the matter a thought.

“Benoît is up at the châlet with the flocks and cattle.”

“Then who takes up the food? The children, Etienne and Jean-Marie?”

“No, I do. I’m used to that.”

As of course she was. She had done it for years, but that was before she had taken charge of the house.

“But who manages the house when you aren’t here, Maddalena?”

“Rina—she’s quite grown up now.”

At this moment a tall, fresh-colored healthy girl of seventeen came in; when she caught sight of me she blushed, and tried to hide behind her brother Etienne who followed her.

“How you *have* grown,” I said. “You’ll be getting married before long.”

At this her already pink cheeks flushed to a deep crimson. I thought my reference to marriage would please her, but I realized at once that I

had wounded her feelings. Her father's death was perhaps too recent for her to think of courtship. I was sorry for having spoken. With these Maurienne peasants you must choose your words as carefully as in the most refined company. Etienne spoke up in order to cover his sister's embarrassment.

"She has plenty of time," he said, "no need to hurry her."

Etienne was tall and thin with wide shoulders and a narrow waist; he had sharp features like Jean-Pierre's, his nose a little less hooked and his chin not so pointed. His manner was softer than that of his grandfather, and he had an air of spirituality inherited from his grandmother. As often happens where many generations and races live together, this lad had inherited more from his grandparents and ancestors than from his parents. I looked at Etienne for some time, this lad who was to be my intimate companion for the next three weeks, and I felt affection for him not unmixed, I declare, with doubt. How in the world could this boy take the place of his omniscient father—a wonderful hunter, a marvelous cook, an inimitable spinner of yarns? I never could hope to replace *him!*

"So I'm to take you with me!"

"Yes, Monsieur l'Avocat."

"You know something about the chamois?"

"A little, Monsieur l'Avocat."

"You're quite at home in the mountains, though?"

"Oh, yes. I know the mountains all right."

The boy was, I knew, better educated than most youths of his age. Not long since, the Curé of Bessans thought he had a vocation and put him into the Seminary at Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne. Though Etienne did well in his studies and learned with the greatest facility, he stopped suddenly at the end of his second year. He felt the need of mountain air; the Alpine pastures were calling him. The pious Pétronille and the superstitious Maddalena were grieved at Etienne's decision, for both of them had dreamed of seeing him return to them one day a Curé who would give them his blessing.

Jean-Marie was in every way different from his brother. He was a stout rosy-cheeked youngster, a glutton who delighted in stuffing himself with soup and potatoes, and already began to resemble his father. He had soon learned tricks of every sort, to know flowers and plants and mushrooms and all the animals, to carve wood, and even to master the first principles of the art of cooking. "Later," I thought to myself as I observed the ceaseless activity of the boy, who paid no more attention to me than if I had not been there— "Later, I'll take *him* with me. At fourteen he knows more than his learned brother the seminarian."

Besides Etienne, I took with me the same four beaters of the year before: Antoine Portaz, Sérafîn Ruffin, Michel Burnin, and Anthèle Chabord. On my way up I stopped to pay my respects to the hermit Benoît. As usual, I found him deferential but taciturn. When I spoke of his father his answer was like Maddalena's:

"He got the notion into his head, and left. Everyone is free to do as he likes. There is no use trying to persuade or advise people."

Etienne and Benoît seemed to be on good terms with each other. Benoît, indeed, appeared to be making some effort to create a more human attitude toward Claude's children and seemed anxious to take the place of the dead father. At least, this is how I interpreted the interest inspired in him by Etienne's visit. Etienne had with him his father's dog Coal. It was remarkable that Benoît, who never showed any affection except for his cows, condescended to pat the little dog; but Coal ran off growling.

We spent the afternoon settling ourselves at the châlet, which I had rented for the season. The little house is situated at the summit of the neck between the spurs of the Albaron and the Charbonel. As you stand there, there spreads out before you the nearby glaciers, with only a few sprinklings of larch and sloping pastures between you and them. If you turn back in the direction from which you have climbed, up the Valley of

the Arc, you are faced with the majestic Ridge of La Vanoise—the peaks of Le Vallonbrun and Méan-Martin, and the equivocally named Croix-de-Don-Juan-Maurice.

The first night of each season in the mountains invariably intoxicates me: the solitude, far from petty disputes and human turmoil and from men who weary one and eat into one's life as moths eat into fur; the infinite peace that seems to reach the somber arch of Heaven sprinkled with the silver-dust of innumerable stars; the silence broken only by the regular rhythm of the stream; the fresh air that caresses the face and enters into the very soul and gives it life; everything together exalts me like some soul-stirring chant and soothes me like a prayer. My companion felt just as I did, and our sensations found expression in the simple words, "It's good to be here!" But I soon discovered that it was not quite so good as it used to be: Claude was missing, and his son did not exactly fill his place. I don't mean that the food—prepared by Sérafín—was bad; it lacked merely a certain seasoning and variety, but I got used to it; not that the hunting was unsatisfactorily planned or unsuccessful. On the contrary, I made many a good shot and enjoyed many a fine chase. It was simply that there was something in the air during the first few days—I couldn't make out.

After dinner I joined the beaters in the kitchen

as I had always done: that was almost the pleasantest part of the day. I remember so well the huge open fireplace and the flaming logs that lighted up the whole room, though during the interminable August twilights there is little need of artificial light. A fresh chamois skin hung on a hook, and the meat lay on a shelf against the wall. We lighted our pipes and exchanged endless yarns until bedtime. It was here that the unchanging customs and the whole history of Bessans were revealed to me. What extraordinary tales of hunting, in which the chamois invariably received unstinted praise for his courage and strength! There was one story of a buck, wounded by a rifle shot who fell from a height of fifteen meters; the hunters thought he had been killed outright, but they soon caught sight of him running away: he had fallen on his feet and was making off at full speed. And there was that other story of the female chamois with her kid. The kid was hard pressed by the dogs. Protecting her young, she made her way into a rock crevice that was open on one side. Standing in front of the kid she faced her pursuers, maintaining a magnificent attitude of defiance. She stood her ground, receiving two shots without moving; the third killed her, and only when she had fallen, was the kid revealed.

Stories of this sort arouse our admiration for

the game we pursue: they appeal to the hunter's soul. Why should we not respect and admire our enemy?

And after the stories we would make ready for the next day's hunt. Each one would suggest his plan. When Claude was with us it was different: his plan and his alone was always followed. He knew exactly where to go. The eager faces of the hunters stood clearly revealed by the fire of blazing pine-logs; they were the faces of men who had worked hard and dined well. We were united by common interests and a common existence, eating and hunting together in these airy mountains. We understood one another perfectly and lived in close accord despite occasional jealousies among the men.

Somehow I felt a foreboding that this cordial relationship was about to end. There were occasional pauses during our conversations, and prolonged silences; the men's faces expressed concern, something remained unspoken, something was being held back. What, I asked myself, could be the reason, and I repeated this question day after day. I finally decided that it was the presence of Etienne.

"This Etienne of yours has the evil eye," Louis de Vimines said to me one day.

Perhaps he was too young to be associated with us? Our ways of living were possibly not suited

to a boy of his age. I would watch him carefully; he would soon give me a chance to learn whether that were so.

One evening I went into the kitchen with Vimines and found only two of the men: Sérafin, the cook, and Anthèleme Chabord. I inquired about the others.

“The boy took them off,” I was told.

“Where to?”

“Bonneval.”

“Without my permission? Why, we’re going to start off tomorrow at sunrise! I don’t like this at all.”

“Well, you see,” explained the cook, who was evidently the official spokesman, “you said at supper you were going to bed the minute you were through eating.”

“I was tired then, but I’m not tired now. This is a nice how-d’ye-do!”

“They didn’t expect you’d come in here.”

“And they took advantage of that to run away!”

“Beg your pardon, sir, it was a bet Etienne made, that they couldn’t walk to Bonneval and back in four hours and a half. They’ll be here by midnight.”

“Yes, and in fine condition for tomorrow!”

“They’ll be all right. You don’t know them!”

“And what’s the bet?”

“Claude Couvert’s rifle.”

"What the devil! Why, that's an old Martini I gave him. It's still good. Very foolish of Etienne to part with that weapon—it had a wonderful sight!"

The incident had made me quite angry, and I left the kitchen and went straight to bed.

Next morning Etienne called me on time as if nothing had happened; as a matter of fact, he seemed brighter and more light-hearted than usual. He threw the shutters wide open and a bright morning sun flooded the room.

"Well, what about your jaunt to Bonneval?"

"You know about that, Monsieur l'Avocat?"

"Of course. Who won?"

"They did. We were back by midnight."

"It was very stupid of you. In the future you will be good enough to remain at your post and not turn this establishment upside down."

I was soon to learn the real reason for the boy's apparently meaningless adventure.

A few days later, as I was scaling a particularly steep rock on the side of the Albaron, on my way to a lookout, Portaz, who was carrying my gun and bag, suddenly stopped and turned to me:

"Monsieur, I want to go."

"Go where?"

"I want to quit."

"Why, Antoine, you've been one of my steadiest men since the very first. Let's climb up first and you can tell me all about it up there." But

the man insisted that he wanted to go. He didn't like the idea of being suspected of murder.

"Why, my dear fellow, who suspects you?"

The suspicions harbored by the Judge at Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne immediately occurred to me.

"It's Etienne. He played a trick on us last night and took us to Bonneval. You know where the road runs along the river between Barmanère and the bridge—well, he showed us the place where his father was strangled. 'You see,' he said, 'Coal knows the place. Coal remembers. Here, Coal!' And the dog did begin to howl and jumped into the water. Dogs've got wonderful memories. And then do you know what the boy did? He took his dog by the collar and pushed him up against Michel Burnin, and then me."

"What did he mean?"

"He meant that he wanted to find out if the dog remembered me or Michel."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"It's the truth I'm telling you, and this very morning he's trying to play the same trick on Séraphin Ruffin and Anthèle Chabord. He can keep his father's rifle and go to hell for all of me! I'm not used to keeping company with detectives! I won't stand any more tricks like that!"

I did my best to quiet him and promised to straighten out the matter.

So this was why our evenings had been spoiled!

Some obscure instinct had told us that we were all under suspicion and constant surveillance. Old Jean-Pierre had warned me that "these notions" were not good for Etienne, that his "shoulders weren't broad enough." He was like a puppy that has not learned to hunt, and in his desire to avenge his father he followed every false scent. He had doubtless imagined that the murderer knew Claude Couvert had gone to Bonneval to sell this except the men he was living with and who were naturally jealous of him? And he had counted on the dog. Coal would without doubt recognize the murderer if he could be brought to the scene of the crime. That is why Etienne had made his companions submit to the ordeal.

I hadn't brought Etienne with me to have him play pranks of this sort, and when we returned from the hunt I planned to see him alone. The moment he was with me I took the initiative before he had a chance to speak:

"So this is the way you abuse my hospitality!"

"My father was murdered, you know!"

"That is by no means certain. Your grandfather didn't think so. I'll be glad to talk over the whole matter with you, but in any case you have shown a lack of confidence in me. You think you are cleverer than those who have investigated your father's death. You have taken it into your head to suspect and spy upon honest men; other

people have had the same notion, those who had a better right than you, a wider experience and better evidence. They have admitted that they were mistaken. I would gladly have told you this if you had asked me."

In all this he seemed to catch only my allusion to the investigations.

"Others? Who? Tell me, Monsieur l'Avocat."

"Why, the Judge at Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne."

I briefly summed up my conversation with the Judge and repeated the evidence I had given proving the innocence of my men; the terrific storm the night of the murder, the fact that the men's clothes were dry the next morning, and the conclusive fact that they had no change of clothing.

"That's true," agreed Etienne. "They would have been soaked going down to Bonneval."

I had succeeded in reassuring him, but the moment I had finished, an extraordinary thing occurred to me: I had never thought of it before. When I had gone to Benoît's châlet to inquire about Claude, which took me not over fifteen minutes, I had found Benoît half naked, drying his clothes in the morning sun. He must, therefore, have gone out during the storm: to look for his cows, he had said. It is impossible to control the notions that come into one's head: You either accept or reject them. In this instance, however, I was unable to do either. Why, the notion was

fantastic, terrible. Benoît and Claude, though they were somewhat incompatible, got along very well together. I had no right, without the least tangible evidence, to suspect even for a moment that there could have existed between them a hatred great enough to account for or give a motive to, murder. I blamed myself for allowing the idea to pass through my mind, and resolutely cast it aside. But I could not wholly forget it, for one little detail (quite easily explicable, no doubt) would persist in my mind. Maddalena had come up to the châlet the evening before, but was unable to leave on account of the storm. Benoît had told me this himself. He had not dared let her go on such a night.

My imagination was running away with me. Could it be that my frequent sojourns in the Maurienne had unbalanced me? Was I too falling under the magic and sorcery of the region?

After a long pause I noticed a rapt expression on the face of my companion. He too had been following my course of thought.

“So you are quite convinced now?” I said.

“Yes, but——”

“But what?”

“The dog didn’t bark. He must have known the murderer. They were my father’s comrades and it seemed natural——”

“Oh, let your father’s comrades be! They never wished him harm. And besides, who told

you the dog didn't bark? He couldn't have been heard because of the roaring of the river, and remember, it happened at night while the people at Barmanère were fast asleep. They're heavy sleepers. In all likelihood it was not murder: the court is practically certain of that."

"How?"

I explained in great detail everything his grandfather had told me, passing on the information with all the dignity and eloquence of a lawyer reading a will. But Etienne became actually violent as he protested against this interpretation of the mystery.

"The old man (his grandfather) was willing to forgive the murderer because he was going into a monastery. You've got to do things like that when you have a vocation. But the murdered man was *my* father, remember that."

By this he meant, of course, that it was his business to avenge the murder. I questioned him further urging that even under such extraordinary circumstances no son had any right to accuse people almost at random. I told him he must not let his imagination run away with him. I knew him for an intelligent and level-headed boy and during our long conversation I even explained the theory of Joseph de Maistre on the temporal punishment of crimes and the unexpected events which in the end reveal the criminal. He listened

attentively, and I was so sure of my success that I even joked with him:

“And what about *me*, Etienne, have you suspected me?”

“No, not you.”

“Why not?”

His answer was, to say the least, a crushing one, and decidedly unflattering to me.

“You’re not strong enough: you couldn’t have strangled my father.”

“So that’s the only reason?”

“You were his friend, and you had no motive for killing him.”

He had spoken these words with the utter frankness of youth; he was incapable of the slightest hypocrisy. I now understood to what an extent the “business about his father” had “got him,” according to the picturesque expression of Jean-Pierre, Etienne in his turn had followed every clue, starting invariably from the same point: the murderer must have known of Claude’s trip to Bonneval and the dog must on that occasion have recognized him, otherwise he would have warned his master of the approach of a stranger. It was now my business to restrain this youthful ardor at any cost or the boy might go about accusing everyone. I therefore took advantage of the confidence I had inspired to extract a promise from him:

"When you have any suspicions, come and tell me. We'll investigate together. I've been your grandfather's lawyer, and your father's, so why not let me be yours?"

"All right. I promise."

He smiled, a thing he rarely did. It was a relief to have someone share his secret with him. When we returned to the others his expression was normal and he said no more to Ruffin and Chabord about taking them down to the river.

I imagined now that peace had returned to the châlet, when suddenly I came near ruining everything myself. As I was going to bed one night —my friend Vimines had already turned in—I noticed that I had no cartridges. A disconcerting discovery for a hunter. Maddalena must have received the new supply that had been sent me and left them at Benoît's châlet, having no doubt been unable to bring them up to me. Should I go for them myself? My beaters were fast asleep, worn out by the long day's hunt on the heights and in the valleys. I couldn't think of disturbing them so I set out myself. The moon, which had scarcely begun to wane, shed a light almost as strong as the sun at dawn. I could see the long stretches of the Valley, the trees, and even separate clumps of bushes. The beds of snow and the great glaciers, caressed by the soft white light, sparkled as if animated by a spiritual life. Who has dared think of the mountains as the abode of

death? It is in the mountains that supernal life springs from the very roots of nature. Are not the mountains the vast reservoir of the earth? Is it not they that send down nourishing and beneficent waters to a world of men? As I went down the path I was reminded of what the Ancients had written of the night and inevitably the *tacitae per amica silentia lunae* of Vergil came to my lips.

It was familiar with the internal arrangement of Benoît's hut: downstairs were the kitchen and a furnished room, just over the hay-loft. Even at that time cowherds enjoyed the luxury of a bed. As I put my hand on the latch I saw that the door had not been locked. It is not necessary to lock doors at night in this part of the country. I went into the kitchen; I should only have to knock at Benoît's door and tell him of my predicament. He would then tell me where to find the cartridges and I would return. This was the simplest thing to do, and surely the most natural. I executed my little plan step by step. I knocked twice on the wall and hearing nothing I opened the bedroom door. I had no hesitation, so sure was I that I would not be intruding. Besides, I deemed that our neighborly relations had given me this right.

Through the half-open door I saw distinctly in the bright moonlight that came in through the curtainless window two heads on the bolster: Benoît's and Maddalena's, the long black tresses

of the woman lying in disorder about her shoulders.

“Who’s there?” cried Benoît in a sleepy voice. I had already shut the door and started to go. I wanted to escape—that was my one instinctive desire. I was afraid, afraid of the monstrous secret I had unwittingly discovered. I had up to that moment not dreamed of the possibility of a thing like that. How in Heaven’s name could I so much as suspect this relationship? These two had never been other than indifferent toward each other; they were even hostile. Had I the right to suspect? Claude was dead, and his death had broken the fraternal bonds that had, against their wills (I had seen this with my own eyes) constrained Benoît and Maddalena to live together on terms of at least apparent friendliness. After Claude’s death Benoît might easily have married his sister-in-law had he wished. This sort of thing is often done for the purpose of simplifying the management of the property and for the sake of the children. Even if he had made her his mistress he would in no way have been wronging his dead brother. True, but for how long had Maddalena *been* his mistress? Perhaps she had been in his arms on that stormy night she remained at the châlet, the night of the murder? I could not forget the picture of those two heads on the bolster.

Old Pétronille had known. That was the ex-

planation of her last effort to join their hands: it was her desire that they should legalize their guilty love through the sacred ceremony of marriage. But if she had forgiven them and wished them to marry then obviously their relations had at that time not been actually "criminal." She would never have countenanced that!

And old Jean-Pierre had known. That was why he went off, filled with speechless disgust, to seek a living death in the cellars at Hautecombe. He, the head of the family, would have turned the sinners out of his house if he had suspected their having betrayed Claude while he was alive. No, I had no right to suspect the couple of criminal behavior in the past. Their affair had not begun until after Claude's death. It was bad enough at best. But perhaps Etienne had made this discovery, or suspected some part of the truth?

I made my way rapidly back to my châlet, occupied with these thoughts and determined to tell no one what I had seen.

Early next morning, just before we set out, Benoît brought me the cartridges.

"Maddalena left these for you. She didn't have time to bring them all the way up. She had to go down again."

Though I had asked no questions he went to great trouble to establish an alibi. By his inquisitive expression I saw that he was trying to identify his nocturnal visitor; he was not altogether

reassured until he saw Etienne come up to him and behave in a natural and unconcerned manner. As Benoît turned to go, I called him back and, looking him straight in the eye, said:

"By the way, Benoît, I advise you to turn the key in your lock."

He showed some confusion but remained master of himself as I added:

"If I were you I would keep an eye on Etienne—er—why don't you marry Maddalena?"

Far from taking offence, he seemed grateful.

"I've asked her to marry me, but she doesn't want to."

"Why not?"

"Because of the children."

"I should think that was a reason for marrying. It would—regularize—the situation——"

"Maybe. Maybe it would——"

Then he stalked off to look after his cows. Was my advice sound? I was, as a matter of fact, afraid of Etienne's investigations, as much for his sake as for that of the fickle Maddalena, whose fidelity to the memory of her murdered husband had lasted so short a time. Their affair may even have antedated Pétronille's death; it certainly explained the dying woman's actions.

On leaving the Maurienne after the close of the season and returning to Chambéry I had reason to hope that Etienne would quietly accept the mystery of his father's death. Had I succeeded

in convincing him that it was an accident, and not murder, and consequently carried out the almost testamentary last wishes of Jean-Pierre? In talking with the boy I had always started with that hypothesis. But what if the lad should discover the relationship between his mother and Benoît? This worried me, and the Couvert house from that time on became a house of mystery, the scene of a portentous drama.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE CHAMOIS' REVENGE

WHEN I returned to Bessans the next season—two years after the murder—there was no visible change in the house, but I unconsciously looked for phantoms. Like dogs, whose instinct is guided by a thousand indications in their pursuit of game, we human beings are sometimes mysteriously guided in our relations with our fellow men, and unknowingly discover the deepest-hidden spiritual phenomena. Yet what can we actually do without self-evident proofs? The novelist has recourse to the facile expedient of looking into the minds of his characters: he is able to reveal to us their inmost thoughts. But how does he know? Where did he learn those thoughts? We ordinary beings, deprived of the infinite resources of the writer of fiction, are necessarily confined to an interpretation of the facts and a record of spoken words. In this particular family tragedy words have been of practically no use to me. I have had to read faces, observe attitudes, translate and explain silences.

Benoît and Maddalena had not accepted my advice: they continued to live together as before, just as they had resisted the solemn wordless ob-

jurgation of Pétronille. I attributed this obstinacy to the superstitious character of the Italian. Possibly she believed that in remaining Benoît's mistress she was doing less violence to Claude's memory than in re-marrying; or perhaps she feared Etienne's resentment. She treated her son with marked respect, either because she had once seen in him a potential priest, or because she feared his ever-watchful eyes and keen quick judgment. Later on I learned the real reason for the poor creature's refusal.

I wondered whether she would be able to keep their secret at home. Their life in common was after all a promiscuous affair; could such a *liaison* be effectively hidden? Well, it had been hidden from *me* for a long time, and revealed only by sheer accident. But *was* it an accident? Perhaps we are wrong in using that word to account for those unexpected circumstances, those fatal chances which, according to Joseph de Maistre, reveal criminals. Might not the same accident have happened in the case of Etienne? For Etienne knew. I can't explain how or why, but of this I was positive. The year before I had left him in a state of tranquillity and confidence; on my return I found him preoccupied, irritable, suspicious. All the ground I had won was lost, and I should have to begin all over again if I intended to keep my promise to Jean-Pierre. Etienne must have known, otherwise why this complete

change? How else explain his avoidance not of his uncle Benoît (he never had much to do with him) but of his mother? Something had occurred between mother and son, something so portentous as to render any explanation between them impossible.

I spent one day at Bessans and then went on up to my châlet. Michel Burnin was laid up with rheumatism and I lacked one beater. To my great surprise, Benoît offered to take Michel's place.

"What about your cattle, Benoît?"

"Rina and Jean-Marie will look after them."

I was tempted to refuse. I didn't like the idea of having nephew and uncle together with me. The good fellowship and friendliness of my little community would doubtless be troubled, as it had been last season before I had come to an understanding with Etienne. But I accepted his offer. There is in us all, an instinct of curiosity, a desire to know, to see pass before us the spectacle of human drama, that is almost irresistible. Sometimes, perhaps, we think we can prevent its consummation, though we may secretly not wish to, preferring rather to stand by and learn what will happen next. So far as I was concerned, it was my intention to carry out in this fashion my promise to Jean-Pierre. I would watch Etienne as he spied on Benoît.

Benoît was, as always, the same quiet, impassible, self-sufficing man, even though he realized he

was the object of a determined siege: he kept watch over his preserves, knowing well that no one could advance beyond the ramparts he had thrown up about him. He was especially good at hunting and this seemed to me the more extraordinary as he had had no occasion to make use of his skill during the course of his every-day existence as cowherd and cheese-maker.

One day he was making his way down a steep declivity, quickly and skillfully, planting his heels in the loose earth and carrying a forty-kilo buck on his shoulders. He came down over the slope with Etienne and when I was within hailing distance I gave way to my admiration:

"Good work, Benoît! Why, you're stronger even than your brother Claude."

When I lifted the animal I realized that my praise was by no means excessive.

"That was a good shot of yours," he muttered between his teeth without looking at me. He then bent over the chamois.

I had turned to Etienne.

"The last time I saw your father he had a chamois over *his* shoulders. I remember seeing him as he walked down the mountain with the chamois' head showing above his own. He looked for all the world like Bacchus crowned with vine-leaves."

The moment I had spoken I realized my comparison was scarcely tactful, but the ex-seminarist

was not enough of a classicist to understand the last allusion. I beat a hasty retreat and turned to Benoît.

"You remember. You must have seen him, on his way down to Bonneval?"

"I? No!" Benoît was intent on the chamois, his eyes fixed on the animal's hide.

Maddalena continued as before to bring up supplies to our châlet, and to Rina and Jean-Marie at theirs. At my châlet she of course saw Etienne and her brother-in-law. I dare not say "her lover," for there was nothing in their behavior to arouse the least suspicion in the minds of my beaters.

It was Benoît's business to do errands down in the Valley. One night he disappeared and next morning he was not on hand for the hunt. I could imagine the reason for his absence: he was forty-five and a victim of the flesh, just as Etienne was a victim of the mental torture of suspicion.

Maddalena, I observed, was meantime failing: her face had turned the color of parchment. She came all the way up to the châlet occasionally, escorted by the daughter of Sérafín Ruffin, our cook. She was a pretty girl, that child, not the usual brunette type of the district for she had lovely auburn hair—the incarnation of youth, brightness, happiness. What more natural than that she should pay an occasional visit to her father?

She captivated us all. She wore pretty clothes and loved flowers. She would appear on the scene with a charming black tulle head-dress, from which hung a pink or cerise ribbon floating out behind her as she walked. She would play in the fields and pick white chrysanthemums and violet asters which she made into great bouquets for our châlet, saving out enough to put in her waist or hair. I soon discovered that all these manœuvres were directed at one of our number and one alone: at Etienne. Etienne, the youngest of us was thus favored, but though he was polite to the girl, he was not in the least aware that he was the object of her attentions. But women are naturally more intuitive, and Maddalena promptly realized the girl's feelings. One day she came to me and pointing to Etienne and Mélanie, said:

“They ought to marry.”

“Your boy is still very young.”

“He’s going on nineteen.”

“But what about his vocation? His studies at the Seminary?”

“He’s forgotten all about that. You speak to him about the girl, Monsieur l’Avocat. He’ll listen to you.”

This was not unreasonable, and I had only to look at Mélanie to agree to the proposal. And yet—why should it shock me simply because it had come from Maddalena? It was of course she

who had induced Mélanie to come up with her. She had brought the girl in order to divert Etienne's attention; she knew that the boy suspected. This much I could divine from her hypocritical words.

On the other hand, had not Jean-Pierre made a like request in asking me to look after Etienne? Was it not my duty to see that the boy should enjoy his youth, which he now seemed to have forgotten? For the boy's sake ought I not to act on Maddalena's suggestion? Ought I not, so far as I could, to do my best to avoid an imminent catastrophe?

"But what about you?" I said suddenly to Claude's widow. "Why don't you marry again?"

She was struck dumb. I saw at once that Benoît had not told her of my visit the year before.

"At my age?" she murmured.

"You're not old, Maddalena, and you don't have to look far for a husband."

She hung her head like a naughty child. Maybe it was embarrassment, and not a sense of guilt? I did not care to press the point and therefore promised to speak to Etienne. I liked little Mélanie and I admired the disdainful (or hard-hearted) Etienne. She had that clear-cut medallion-like profile so often found in Bessans, a heritage, it is said, of the long Saracen occupation, for it is seen nowhere else in Savoy. She was saddened by the pathetic failure of her pretty

advances, and a tinge of melancholy lent to her features an inexplicable quiet charm not unlike the refrains in certain songs that linger long on the final notes.

It was not necessary for me to intervene. What purpose could my intervention have served? I really can't say.

An incident occurred one day when we were hunting, the extraordinary importance of which quite escaped me at the time. This incident, which I shall relate in some detail, was to result in Etienne's embarking upon an entirely new venture, infinitely more dangerous and tragic than that of his efforts to discover his father's murderer.

I started out with a light heart. It was a beautiful day, cloudless and crystal clear. I found a good hiding-place, just where the rocky cliff of the mountain rises up in a sheer mass before dipping down on the other side into the Valley. I took my position on a small level stretch of earth, flanked on one side by a pyramid of stone. A herd of chamois, frightened by the cries of the beaters, scampered out from behind the alder bushes and made for the heights.

A moment before, not twenty paces away, I had caught sight of a single chamois silhouetted against the ridge. He could not see me because of the rocks between us, and the wind carried my scent in the opposite direction. My loaded

rifle was on the grass at my side. Without a moment's hesitation I snatched it up and took aim. The animal was at my mercy. And yet I could not make up my mind to shoot. A feeling of respect and, I might almost say, admiration, had quite taken possession of me.

I had often observed, through my field-glasses, the charming antics of these animals on the snow, their mad pranks and extraordinary quadrilles. I had marvelled at the strength and agility with which they scaled vertical walls of rock; the rigidity of their hoofs that gripped the narrowest projection like spurs of steel; and their vertiginous descents into the deepest chasms. But this lone chamois, standing so close to me, indifferent and unafraid, revealed to me a new aspect of the animal. In repose, I was able to study his proportions and the loveliness of his lines. This one was of medium size though, standing as he did upon his four black hoofs, he gave me an impression of sculptural solidity on a large scale. His summer coat was tawny, merging into red, with a belt of white round the belly. I could clearly distinguish the heaving of his flanks as he stood inhaling the clear air or lowering his head to nibble a tuft of grass. The horns, black as ebony and curling backward forming a kind of hook, gave the head a proud look, as a high head-dress puts the finishing touch to a woman's face. As he had nothing to fear, his ears lay back neglig-

gently and his nostrils sniffed the soft wind. Occasionally his black eyes would fasten on wood-cutters working at the edge of the forest in the valley far below. This sight was not unfamiliar to him, and gave him no cause for alarm. Dominating this magnificent panorama he seemed to consider the rock a pedestal for him and him alone. When he walked he was like a lord surveying his domain. I continued to gaze at him and I endowed him with a soul: he had lost his identity as a mere animal, and become a sort of intangible divinity. So long as he remained where he was I knew I could never bring myself to kill him. I would as soon have shot a man or desecrated the statue of a god.

Then the wind shifted. At once his ears shot forward, his nostrils distended, there was terror in his beautiful black eyes, and from his throat came a heavy and prolonged hissing sound. I had ample time to observe each of these phenomena. But what followed I could not clearly see: that phantom leaped so swiftly that I felt the wind of it against my cheek. In an instant the chamois had become my enemy. I put my rifle to my shoulder and aiming almost at random, pulled the trigger. The animal disappeared behind the rock; I was afraid I had missed him. A moment after he reappeared on an ice-field and scampered away full speed over the shining snow. But he was using only three feet: the right fore-

front, broken at the joint turned like a mill-wheel. I exhausted in quick succession all my cartridges but failed to make another hit. Wounded as he was, he cleared an especially difficult precipice. I could not leave the wounded animal in that state, and the chase began in deadly earnest.

By a clever manœuvre, Vimines and I were able to take possession of the heights above, whence we would force the chamois down to the beaters who were ready for him. He did what we expected him to do and passed within range of Pierre Laval, but Laval, who was lying in wait, shot and missed. Though the animal showed the most remarkable signs of vitality, we all knew that he could not, after the loss of so much blood, prolong his resistance indefinitely. He had disappeared from our view and we could only surmise where he had hidden. We were grouped together against the mass of rock, and there through our glasses we examined each rocky ledge and clump of bushes that might possibly harbor the chamois. The wall behind us consisted of a series of stone ledges with here and there a stretch of grass and clumps of junipers. One of us caught sight of the chamois high above us, standing on a slight projection, a foreshortened silhouette against the bright sky. His horns seemed to hang out into the azure vaulting; his neck, craned forward, betrayed terror. For some time he scanned the horizon and then, no doubt

worn out, he lay down. But the neck was still arched, the eyes watchful. Had it not been for this we would have concluded that he had lain down to die.

"He'll never get up again," said the least experienced member of the party. But the others knew that a chamois will rise and face his enemy up to the very end.

I had once seen a buck with both forelegs broken actually rise and face his pursuers. There is no braver or harder animal.

Benoît, who had been handed a rifle, scaled the wall. He, too, was silhouetted high above us as he approached his prey. As yet the animal had not caught sight of the man.

We were mute witnesses of a tense drama: a murderer and his victim were on the stage before us. A moment later we were able to show Benoît by means of signs the place where the chamois had lain down. He must at any cost put an end to the beast's misery. His approach was made with the greatest caution, but the chamois had scented danger, and the next instant he sprang to his feet. He stood over the edge of the precipice and peered down. At the same moment we heard the crack of Benoît's rifle and saw the chamois lunge into the abyss. This time, surely, he was done for! He had jumped just in time to miss the shot, and landed safely on another rock; but the next shot was effective, and he fell. And once again he

rose up, standing not on three feet but on two, and succeeded in dragging himself behind some bushes.

The gathering dusk and the protecting bushes were in the animal's favor. The chase had lasted all day and our search was fruitless. Night had come and all the subtle and malignant sorcery of the mountain combined to save the chamois. We were reluctantly forced to postpone the last act of this tragedy until dawn.

Next morning at the first signs of gray on the horizon I set out with Benoît and Etienne to find the animal. He had gone. He had made heroic efforts and been able to gain the upper gorge of a cascade not far off, where he had sought to bathe his wounds with the fresh water of melted snows. When we came upon him he was lying down, his neck, as before, arched in an attitude of alarmed vigilance. The moment he caught sight of us he actually stood up and faced us, calmly watching our approach. His nostrils quivered, but he made no sound. During our pursuit the day before he had cried out to warn his comrades of danger but in the presence of death he maintained a disdainful silence. His soft black eyes were riveted on us in an expression of almost human anguish. He was ready to accept his fate, but he would not surrender. I read in that expression his regret for tranquil lakes and untried fields, the wind from off the glacier, the

delicate scented pasture, the infinite peace of the mountain—of all of which man had at last come to rob him. This I imagined at the time, but actually there was no regret for the past, only defiance and rage and a challenge to battle.

He would not give up. When the exasperated Benoît came near he made ready to charge. Benoît took firm hold of his horns, but the animal was the stronger. In the pink dawn, by the side of that rose-tinted cascade, they were like a faun and a goat performing a festive dance in honor of Bacchus. Finally, to make an end of the ghastly business, the man put his powerful hands round the animal's neck and choked him. The chamois fell heavily. To his dying gasp he stood his ground.

I had followed every step of the struggle with the greatest admiration and interest. I could not help endowing the victim with a human soul, and I could not rid myself of the notion that his suffering was likewise human. I felt almost as if I had been an accomplice in the murder, and as I bent over the carcass I felt a need to confess having committed a barbaric atrocity. Turning to Etienne to tell him of my hypocritical regrets I was surprised, and then terrified, by the change in his expression. His eyes were those of one who has been hypnotized. They were riveted upon his uncle Benoît who, smiling strangely, was calculating the weight and value of the chamois. As

if by some telepathic flash I could read the boy's mind, feel the throbbing of his heart, and divine the anguish that had taken possession of him. The masterly way in which Benoît had seized and strangled the chamois had brutally called up the picture of his father's murder. Claude had met his death in the very same manner!

*'And by the same hand!'* This is what flashed through our minds, without reason and without proof; it had come to us in a picture. When the boy's excitement momentarily subsided he turned to me and saw that I was watching him intently. I am positive he realized that I had surprised his secret. But he said nothing, and by degrees re-assumed his normal manner.

Benoît suspected nothing of this mute drama: he was busy with the chamois. He took an obvious pleasure in taking out the entrails and filling the carcass with preservative nettles. This done, he bound the feet together and slung the chamois over his shoulders. The blood trickled down his neck and over his hands.

We followed Benoît in silence. In front of the châlet, now reflecting the glory of the newly risen sun, were gathered our companions, ready to celebrate our dishonorable victory. The mule was there, too, though no one had thought of unloading his pack. We could see fruits and the delicious brown crusts of bread in the half-open panniers. Maddalena greeted us gleefully, or

rather Benoît, *her man*. And little Mélanie, her cheeks fresh as ever, her bright ribbon floating in the wind, tried her best to catch Etienne's eye. But the boy paid no attention to her.

I was no longer in the world of actuality; the scene was that in which the ghost of the poisoned king appears to Hamlet at Elsinore. Why, the play-scene had just been enacted, and a dumb animal, strangely mixed up in the troupe, played his part with the murderer. Was this Ophelia before me, with her garland of flowers, doomed to sorrow and despair? Were this infamous couple the usurper Claudius and his accomplice Gertrude? And was Hamlet now about to wreak vengeance upon his incestuous mother and fratricide uncle?

I did my best to dispel this hideous invasion of ghosts, for I had no intention of giving in to an absurd hallucination, the result no doubt of my having read too many old books! Was I not in the mountains, in the company of faithful friends, with the members of the Couvert family whom I had always known as peaceable home-loving folk?

I burst out laughing. The others must have thought I was expressing satisfaction over the morning's hunt. A damnable hunt it was, in which the chamois, struggling up to the very moment of his death, had at last revealed the identity of Claude's murderer.

## CHAPTER VII

### AN ETHICAL PROBLEM

THAT afternoon we set out on a relatively short chase, in pursuit of a stray chamois that was not far off in the underbrush. I took my place at a post from which I could see nothing of the hunt, for I was determined to set my thoughts in order.

In spite of myself these persisted in focussing upon one point: there was no longer a doubt that the intimacy of Benoît and Maddalena antedated the murder. Claude had himself told me as much the day I had said to him, "Don't come back till morning. Sleep at Bessans. Your wife will be glad," and he had replied, "Oh, my wife!" I could not forget the intonation of his voice. Until then he had always treated her with affectionate familiarity, teasing and joking with her and making fun of her pious pilgrimages. Then came this sudden change: he had suspected something.

On the night of the murder Benoît surely knew of his brother's trip down the mountain, as the latter must have passed in front of the lower châlet. And, a more significant point: Maddalena must have met her husband on the way up. What

can have passed between them? They must have separated on unfriendly terms, as he had not asked to borrow the mule to carry the animal, preferring to hire another at Bessans. Was there a quarrel or some sort of misunderstanding? Can he have hinted at her relations with Benoît? Might she afterward have gone straight to her lover with news of the quarrel? Perhaps, and Benoît, fearing the consequences of Jean-Pierre's wrath, not to mention Claude's, may have determined to do away with his brother, and gone about it immediately.

I pictured him setting forth in the storm, leaving Maddalena alone in the châlet—his accomplice, knowing what the night was about to bring forth. Benoît finds a suitable hiding-place behind the bushes by the roadside, where it runs parallel with the stream, between Barmanère and the Bonneval bridge. There he lies in wait. He will be able to see by the light of Claude's lantern; he must have one, for you cannot otherwise travel by night with a mule. The dark night and the heavy rain are in his favor: no one is likely to be outdoors, the roads are deserted. He sees the lantern approach; the dog, trotting on ahead, sniffs Benoît but knows him, and naturally does not bark a warning to his master. His master? Is not the whole family his master? He knows Benoît almost as well as he does Claude. Why should he bark? Benoît allows the mule to pass

on, and the man after him. Then, at a bound, he pounces on Claude from behind, snatches his lantern, throws it away, and bringing into play that marvelous co-ordinated strangle-hold he used on the chamois, chokes his victim, who is of course unable to make a sound. The body he then throws into the stream.

The whole thing is over in a few seconds.

The doctor who examined the wounds on the dead man's neck was positive that only a very strong man could have done the deed. There was no need to prove the physical strength of Benoît Couvert.

The murderer then hastens on past the mule that ambles off to Bessans, and returns to his chalet. It is not a long trip for a man like Benoît. Had he not recently made a similar journey by night to see his mistress? He returns as fast as possible in order to join Maddalena who has not gone to sleep, and the incestuous couple consummate in sin their unspeakable crime.

Next morning at dawn she starts back. In the bosom of her family she will pretend to know nothing, while the others speculate on the disappearance of Claude, and the return of the mule without him. She will act the part of the grieved wife when the body is at last brought home. But she will leave to Claude's mother the preparation of the bier and the laying out of the body: *that* she will not dare to touch.

How clearly can we read each gesture, each glance, when once we have the clue!

Up on the mountain Benoît has risen; he finds his clothes soaked through and through. He hangs them up to dry in the morning sun. I find him there at work—suspicious work!

He is present at his victim's funeral, and there the Judge whispers to me: "See all these people: the murderer is surely among them." And he is, one of the most prominent. And then the inquest and the long fruitless search. Who could have suspected incest and fratricide? Who would dream of accusing Benoît and Maddalena? They surely are immune from suspicion. Is it not Benoît's idea to marry Maddalena and take Claude's place? But she refuses. Why? In order to divert suspicion? Is it a belated gleam of respect for the memory of her defunct husband? Perhaps she is unable to face Pétronille, or fears the wrath of Jean-Pierre, who is unfavorably disposed toward such a union? Or, finally, is it not rather a deep-rooted religious fear of Hell, whither she must carry her remorse? After Claude's death her pilgrimages cease; she dares not go to confession, and before marriage everyone must confess. Yes, that explains her refusal. It were better to believe her guilty even of illicit love.

But the illicit love is discovered. Old Pétronille knows of it, she grieves her life out because

of it, and is horror-stricken at the crime. She suspects as well that Claude's murderer is in her own home, and is sick at the knowledge that he is flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone. And she has no doubt that sin and crime have been committed in her house during Claude's lifetime. It was horrible enough in the eyes of the saintly old woman that Maddalena should be guilty of adultery; that was why her last act was an effort to regularize the union.

And Jean-Pierre had guessed, but being more perspicacious than his wife he went one step further. He was an old hand at legal procedure and knew how to reach a logical conclusion in his reasoning. This of course explained his belated and apparently reasonless vocation. What other possible motive could there be? Why else should he of all men submit to the discipline of a monastery? Was it natural? The house had become unbearable to him. But I could not make out how he had learned the facts. At any rate, he carried off his secret with him, and the atmosphere of good fellowship during our last dinner was not sufficient to make him reveal it to me. But everything he said and did proved that he knew: his disinheriting Benoît for instance—though I must admit he did the same to the innocent Jean-Marie. But could he have suspected that Jean-Marie was not Claude's child? Could the affair be traced that far back? Did the boy,

really resemble Benoît? I had not noticed, but I determined to do so at the first opportunity.

Then there was that visit to the Judge at Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne—that was significant. He is the head of the family, he cannot deliver his own son into the hands of justice; on the other hand, if he remains at home he will become Benoît's accomplice, to all intents and purposes a party to the crime. He must leave in order to devote his remaining days to the expiation of a crime committed by his children. But he intends that what he was unable to do no outsider shall do for him: before he disappears he does everything in his power to prevent further investigations, which might lead to appalling discoveries. He therefore appeals in person to the Judge, asking him to close the case. On what grounds? On the grounds simply that no crime had been committed; there would surely have been a clue otherwise, and no clue had as yet come to light. Claude had no enemies; his death therefore was accidental. And he retires with this white lie on his lips, a lie which the Judge, already at his wits' end, is only too ready to believe.

There is, however, one disturbing element. In the old man's house is another restless, inquisitive mind: Etienne burns with a desire to avenge his father. *He* must be satisfied, convinced. And the boy has found a clue, one that his grandfather had never dreamed of. This is why Jean-Pierre had

warned me of the lad's extreme susceptibility. He asked me to help Etienne, to guide and befriend him. And this he did before going off to bury himself alive.

So at last I had the key to the mystery: it opened every door and I was able to peer into the darkest chambers.

Comfortably settled in my hiding-post, effectively screened by a wall of rock, I heard the shouts of the beaters, but I had no wish to join in the chase. The idea of harrying a lone chamois did not appeal to me.

Another drama absorbed all my attention: an abyss opened at my feet. I recalled how once I had broken through a bridge of snow and fallen into the crevasse. Fortunately the rope binding me to the guide and porter did not break, and I was saved. It was hard work climbing out; my hands and knees slipped over the smooth surface of the ice, and when I looked below me I saw bluish depths without end.

And, as I pondered the whole matter it seemed as if I was again in that gaping chasm, suspended over a bottomless pit. I strove, as before, to climb up to the light of day.

It was clearly my duty to bring the culprits to the bar of justice. Witnesses are the eyes and ears of the law and have no right to refuse their services. But to whom should I go with my story?

To whom confide my moral certainty? To the Judge at Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne or simply to Etienne, proving to him that this time he was on the right track? The incident of Benoît's wet clothes would be enough. Should I play the Ghost to my young Hamlet?

I must be demented: here I was constructing a whole Shakespearian drama on a hypothesis for which I have no proofs, only a series of ingenious conjectures; I had built up a structure not unlike that of Judge Fonclair when he tried to implicate my beaters. On second thoughts I realized to what an extent the facts had become colored by my imagination. As a matter of fact I was quite unable to say when Maddalena had become Benoît's mistress. Claude's "Oh, my wife!" might mean no more than that he was tired of her or preferred hunting to a night at home. It may easily have meant no more than that. And then why should I rashly conclude that Benoît, busy with his cattle or making cheese, had actually seen his brother? And Maddalena might easily have come to the châlet without meeting her husband. I knew, too, that she could not have returned in that storm, and that she had remained with Benoît as a matter of course. At that time I had thought they were scarcely on speaking terms. If they were on terms of intimacy, why, the storm had merely served as an excellent pre-

text. Benoît's explanation of the incident was logical and clear. During the legal investigations I had insisted that no one's having heard the dog bark was a matter of no importance, because of the roaring torrent, the late hour, and the distance from Barmanère. Pétronille's dumb prayer had been inspired solely by her moral susceptibilities and Jean-Pierre's departure was explicable on the same grounds. There was also without doubt a certain impulsiveness and fantasy in his act traceable to his Maurienne blood. After all, why should he not actually believe in the version of accidental death which he had gone to the trouble of laying before the court? As regards the distribution of his property it was not unnatural, taking into account the universal desire among peasants to keep land in the family, that he should disinherit the unmarried Benoît in order to maintain the principle of primogeniture in favor of Etienne, Claude's eldest son.

You see how easy it was to destroy the hypothesis I had created. Perhaps this was due to my lawyer's habit of defending rather than accusing the client. But the moment I had demolished my case I was faced with a delicate problem in ethics. You see, old Jean-Pierre was my client, too. I could not divulge what I had learned from him in my professional capacity. That secret must be jealously guarded. But this was precisely the keystone to my latest theory. Every

part fitted into every other: eliminate one element and nothing remained. For example, the detail of Benoît's clothes—actually the only *fact* in the chain of evidence—would never have assumed the slightest importance in my mind without all the other details. No, I could under no circumstances accuse Benoît and Maddalena, or even suspect them, as I had no means of proving my assertions.

Since Etienne had promised the year before to share with me his worries and suspicions, he had not once confided in me.

On the morning that we returned together behind Benoît who was carrying the chamois, he had made no reference to the matters that I knew were occupying all his attention. This might be explained by the fact that like me, he was sympathizing with the animal that had shown itself so beautifully courageous in its struggle with the brutal man. Very likely I had exaggerated the meaning of the eager expression in his eyes. It is so easy to misread an expression. (I really ought to be on my guard against first impressions!) It seemed almost as though I had a mania for dramatizing life. Was it because I had spent so much time in this tragic Maurienne, so crowded with history and legend, sorcery and witchcraft?

As I argued the case for and against, inclined sometimes to accuse and sometimes to exculpate, there happened to me what oftens happens under

similar circumstances: the game I was hunting surprised me at my pose. Suddenly I saw just under me, with only a rock and a tuft of junipers between us, the very animal we were after. Or rather, I saw only his head, with his long curved black horns and delicate ears. His soft eyes were placidly fixed upon me. He showed no sign of fear, and it seemed as though he knew the state of my troubled conscience and relied on that to escape when and how he liked. I dared not move for fear of blotting out this singular vision of grim irony. I thought for a second that I was the victim of an hallucination, and I am sure that not St. Hubert himself, seeing the deer with a Crucifix, could have been more surprised than I at this unexpected tête-à-tête with the chamois. Extraordinary as it may seem, the animal stood and continued to look at me. Even now I sometimes ask myself whether the duration of our tête-à-tête was not exaggerated by my overheated imagination.

Then the chamois leaned forward and I could distinguish his neck which had been caught between two branches of a bush and held tight as with two human hands—like Claude's neck between the knotty hands of Benoît.

Men who have such visions have no business hunting. I picked up my rifle and took aim. To shoot down from a height is never easy. The confounded animal managed to extricate himself

and dash away. I can see him now, a large, dark, well-built buck. I missed him. Perhaps after all he was only a ghost.

"It was such a beautiful chance!" said Vimenes reproachfully.

"Then it *was* real?"

"What do you mean?" asked my puzzled companion.

"A real chamois?"

"I should think it was. He passed across our path not far off, but shot out at right angles when he got our scent. I notice you fired."

"Oh, I hardly took aim."

I did not tell anyone of my adventure; no one would have believed me.

Maddalena left us that evening to return to Bessans in company with little Mélanie of the pink ribbons. The girl carried off armfuls of flowers which she had picked during the day. She turned back from time to time to shout to her father who, busy in the kitchen, took no trouble to answer her. She was of course trying to attract Etienne's attention. But young Hamlet showed no sign of interest in his Ophelia. He was observing, scrutinizing, examining every move of his uncle Benoît, who, ever since the morning's adventure, seemed to have thrown off his habitual moroseness, far from suspecting that he had finally betrayed himself. The last stage of the pursuit was taking place under my own roof.

So it seemed that my wild suppositions were not wrong after all; and suppositions, when they are logical, coherent, and precise, are as good as proofs. The murderer was here in our midst and the victim's son was on his trail. Of what interest were ordinary hunts compared with this?

## CHAPTER VIII

### PURSUIT

No time was lost in starting. Indeed, the attack was made in my presence, in that of my companions Vimines and Laval, and some of my beaters. But I was the only one who could follow the pursuit and understand every move.

We rested for a day and made use of the extra time to inspect every rock and green patch that might harbor the chamois. We scanned through field-glasses every inch of a large rock that stood at the edge of a chasm two or three hundred meters wide some distance off. Antoine Portaz insisted he had seen a chamois there.

“How could he have climbed up?” asked the sceptical Laval.

“Claude Couvert did it once,” replied Antoine petulantly, “and he was only a man.”

“Claude Couvert? Nonsense! Only crows can go up there!”

“It was the year before he died,” insisted the beater. There was a dispute over the possibility of making the ascent, and Portaz turned from one to the other in quest of eye-witnesses, every one of whom backed up his assertions.

"What a terrible loss for us all!" I said.  
"Claude was the King of the Mountains."

Benoît and Etienne had taken no part in the discussion, but when it was over the boy turned to his uncle and said:

"Uncle Benoît, you've never seen the place where father was killed. I'll take you there whenever you like."

"What's the use?" answered Benoît. "It was only an accident."

A plausible answer: he had accepted Jean-Pierre's version, but I somehow insisted on considering it as a partial confession. I had the key, and could easily read between the lines. Etienne had the little dog with him when he offered to go down with his uncle. He was determined to work out the plan he had made last year. Coal was the only witness, and Coal would remember every thing once he was on the scene, and of course recognize the murderer. With the help of the dog, Etienne would be certain. He never varied in his methods.

Then a strange thing happened; I wondered if Etienne had noticed. Never had I seen Benoît caress the dog; he now tried it, and Coal showed his teeth. But perhaps the same hostility had existed before Claude's death? I couldn't say. Benoît, at least, had never shown any great affection for him.

It was I who had brought Benoît and Etienne

together on this occasion, and I alone was able to interpret the meaning of the boy's offer. At least I thought I was the only one, for my beaters were concerned, if at all, only with Etienne's former suspicion of them. But I caught a glimpse of Benoît's face as he looked at Coal. He was immediately on his guard. He understood; of this I had conclusive proof, for some days later Coal was found dead among the rocks. The murderer had got rid of a dangerous witness.

Dogs, however, are often killed up among these precipitous rocks; it is so dangerous that we long ago gave up hunting with them.

Why does every event present two aspects, one natural, and the other suspicious?

Etienne was furious over the loss of his dog. He had no hesitation in accusing Benoît—not directly, of course, but I could read resentment in his face. War was declared between the two, a war of ambuscades, and I feared for the younger of the combatants.

Benoît retired once more within his wall of impenetrability and ill-humour. His power, his self-possession and a thorough knowledge of the formidable game he was playing, made him an altogether dangerous man. His abrupt silences and assumed airs of affability were terrible. I was worried on account of Etienne, whose "shoulders," according to Jean-Pierre, were not intended for "these notions!" The Prince of Denmark,

too, had not sufficiently broad shoulders to perform the duty imposed upon him by the ghost of Elsinore. Knowledge of guilt alone is not enough for the execution of justice.

Little by little Claude's son lost ground. He asked stupid questions, resulting only to his disadvantage, and one day Benoît was able to take the offensive. Portaz' chamois was at last sighted through the field-glasses, and Benoît turned to his nephew:

"Do you want to go after him? Your father could climb the rock, and you are as good a climber as he was. Portaz has found the trail. You take the little path to the right, and then cross over to the left."

Benoît gave this information without looking at Etienne, whose pride was naturally touched. But I remembered what had happened to the dog—his "accidental" death. A similar "accident" was being proposed to Etienne. Etienne was at first tempted to go, but he too must have thought of Coal, for he turned to Benoît and said:

"I'll go if you'll go, Uncle."

This took Benoît by surprise. He thought for a moment and then decided to take the chance:

"All right, youngster, we'll both go."

He said "youngster" when he wished particularly to exasperate Etienne. The two eyed each other like duellists about to engage in mortal combat, each calculating the other's power of resis-

tance. It was evidently their intention to fight it out up there on the rock—a duel to the death. Would it, I wondered, be a fair and equal fight? On their way up the steep rock might not one try to throw the other into the abyss. Who would know of it? It is so easy to misinterpret things at a distance. The refusal to lend a hand at a critical moment would never be noticed.

I calculated the danger, and interposed my authority:

“I won’t allow either of you to go.”

“Very well, if you say so,” said Benoît.

Etienne was not so ready to give in: he had seen in this duel the opportunity he had longed for.

In order to prevent accidents I saw to it that Etienne was close by my side during the hunt, showing him marked preference by allowing him to carry my lunch bag and fetch the game for me. But the analytical Etienne realised that I was keeping a strict watch over him. I am not sure whether or not he guessed my reasons, but he made it a point of honor to perform his duties to perfection. Suddenly—doubtless he had thought it all out—he was grateful to me, though he showed his gratitude rather by deed than by word. But his new manner troubled me: he had told no one of his secret. Later, I discovered that he had suffered in silence. My existence, living as I did between these two men, was like a con-

tinual dream, in which I could only speculate regarding which of the two would be the first to kill the other. How was I to disarm them? If the pursuer were to cease the pursuit, the criminal would naturally be no longer on the defensive.

I called to mind Jean-Pierre's advice: "Let Etienne enjoy himself like other young men." I must therefore offer him distractions if I hoped to avoid a catastrophe.

It was he himself who gave me the occasion. One day when we were hunting he wanted to know whether it would be possible to attain his legal majority before the normal time.

"It is possible," I explained, "in a way, at least—by 'emancipation.' But the status of 'emancipation' is by no means legal majority. Are you thinking of getting married?"

"I? No!" he replied, almost indignantly.  
"Why?"

"If you were married you would be legally 'emancipated.' Marry that little girl who comes here with your mother. Haven't you noticed her? She's always making eyes at you. She's really very fond of you. Mélanie is as pretty a girl as I ever saw—what fresh cheeks and bright eyes! How good-natured she is, with a kind word for everyone, and a love of flowers—! If I were you I shouldn't hesitate. Her father, Sérafín, is the best man in Bessans, and that's saying a

great deal. You must think of the family you're marrying into, you know."

He listened attentively to my harangue, and I thought when I had ended that the secretive boy had all along been deceiving us regarding his affection for Mélanie. But his answer proved me wrong:

"I don't want to marry."

Had I been indiscreet in hinting that family reputation was a matter of importance in this connection? I tried the attack again from a different angle.

"If not Mélanie, then someone else. There are plenty of pretty girls in Bessans."

"Oh, girls!" It was an echo—I had heard something very much like that, long ago.

In these two words there was a haunting melancholy: regret for the unattainable, longing for tenderness and love that could never be his. I could not otherwise interpret that sigh of the ex-seminarist, a lad who had preserved intact his youthful modesty, and possibly his youthful innocence.

"No, I don't want to marry," he repeated with unmistakable emphasis.

I thought of poor drooping Mélanie, while Etienne returned to his legal inquiries:

"Isn't there another way, Monsieur l'Avocat?"

"No, you cannot attain your majority before

you reach the right age. ‘Emancipation’ is simple enough. A widow can emancipate her children when they have reached fifteen. All you need is her declaration before a justice of the peace.”

“Do I make the application?”

“No, it must be your mother.”

“Then ask my mother to apply.”

“I have no objection, but tell me, why do you want this?”

“I don’t know. Or—I can at least give away my property?”

“Oh, no you can’t.”

So that was his reason: he wanted to make his will. He would seem then to have abandoned the pursuit, allowing Benoît to resume his daily life, either because he could think of no new method of attack or because he had lost his absolute conviction of his uncle’s guilt.

One morning, when Benoît had gone off with the beaters, Etienne asked leave to remain behind in the châlet. I was afraid he wanted to begin again, and I began by refusing. He explained that as this was the day when supplies were expected he would like to wait and see his mother.

“Your mother—and also Mélanie?”

He was a little more gracious than usual, and answered:

“Perhaps Mélanie, too.”

"Very well then, you may stay."

After I had stationed myself in my post on the slope of Albaron, I pondered over our little conversation. It was pleasant to think that the girl's charms were at last beginning to take effect on the hard-hearted Etienne. She would be the oasis in his life, the shade, the peace, the rest. She would also bring happiness, and end by inducing him to forget his vengeance and his "sacred duties." And then I was seized by a terrible doubt. What if Etienne, unable to attack Benoît, were to turn against his mother? Was it not his intention at this instant to induce the imprudent Maddalena to talk while Benoît was out of the way? Perhaps he had decided to forget filial respect and arrive at the truth in that way?

Absorbed as he was by his warfare with Benoît he had taken no account of the abyss into which his mother would be thrown were he to secure absolute proofs of the crime. Was it not she who had spent the night of the murder in the châlet? Would Etienne denounce her after wringing a confession from her? I hardly dared imagine the interview between mother and son. I ought to have remained with them. I owed it to Jean-Pierre.

When I heard the horn announcing that the chamois was finally at bay, instead of joining my companions and lunching with them as usual, I made my way back to the châlet, unseen by any-

one. The few provisions I had brought with me were quite sufficient. I calculated that Maddalena would not have arrived before my return, but as a matter of fact I saw the mule, just relieved of his burden, quietly munching his grain in front of the door. In a field nearby, I caught sight of two girls picking flowers: Mélanie and Rina, no doubt. Rina sometimes came up with her mother.

Etienne had been some time alone with his mother. How long had they been together?

I went into my room to put down my rifle and leave my cartridges. This room is upstairs on the second floor, and has a long window opening on a balcony with a view of the Valley of the Averole, opposite that of the Albaron which you can see from the front door. Below the balcony outside is a bench. As I stepped out, I could hear voices, and I knew that Maddalena and her son were there. They could not have suspected my return, for there was no interruption in their conversation. I had no business to listen, but I knew their affairs so intimately that I unhesitatingly took this opportunity of clearing up my doubts, if only for the purpose of preventing further crimes and the ultimate ruin of the Couvert family. I would reveal my presence if I felt it necessary.

I was surprised to find that it was the woman who conducted the conversation. Etienne scarcely answered, possibly because he felt that such a

cross-examination was more decorously executed in that way; or perhaps he had stopped short, terrified at the idea of making a direct attack himself. That at least is how I interpreted the slow and hesitating manner of his replies. Maddalena spoke to him much as the Queen speaks to Hamlet. She urged him to cease his attempts, telling him, "It happens to us all; everything that lives must die, to live again in Eternity." This at least was the burden of her words. She encouraged him to enjoy himself like other young men, speaking like a procuress describing her wares, and then went on to praise Mèlanie, who was healthy and virtuous, hard-working and well-shaped. There was in her description of the girl a sensuality that opened my eyes to a great deal in her own character. At an earlier time her religious pilgrimages offered her a certain distraction; now she was completely dominated by her passion. She could not conceal that: even her words betrayed it. It was as if she were undressing in my presence. Would she be able to maintain any sort of defence under the rapid fire of a really clever cross-examination undertaken for the purpose of incriminating her? Etienne had her at his mercy, though he did not realize it; but I did.

The more he tried to take refuge in soft evasive answers, the harder did she press him:

"Mélanie comes up here to see *you*. You're a

handsome boy, Etienne. Set the day; say when it's to be."

Etienne impatiently repulsed her, though he managed to be polite:

"There's no hurry, *Mama.*" He used the familiar peasant form.

Was he moved by her maternal solicitude or simply hesitating to perform his terrible duty? I am convinced that nothing would have happened had not Maddalena ended her harangue by suggesting something she had set her heart on, reawakening all the latent hatred and desire for revenge in the breast of Etienne. Was not this one of these "unforeseen circumstances" which, according to Joseph de Maistre, inevitably betray the cleverest criminals?

"And there is something else, Etienne, I wanted to say, now that you're in a quiet humor. Your Uncle Benoît is anxious about you and wants you to be happy. Why are you so unkind to him?"

"Who told you I was?"

"He did. He wasn't complaining, he just told me. After all, you know, he takes your father's place in the family."

"Takes your father's place" was peculiarly unfortunate. Even I, as I stood on my balcony, was shocked—it seemed almost an insult to me; what must have been the effect on Etienne? It was now his turn to cross-question his mother;

her words had swept away the last vestige of respect he felt he owed her:

"Were you on the path to Averole when you saw him for the last time?"

Without even asking what he referred to, she answered quietly:

"I had just come up to the châlet with the mule when I saw him coming down with his chamois."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"Of course: 'Good day.' Why not?"

"Did he say anything about me, or Jean-Marie, or Rina?"

"I don't remember. He was going to Bonneval to sell the chamois. He seemed very happy. He was thinking of nothing but that."

"I see. Thinking of nothing but that. Uncle Benoît was with you, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was with us. He was over by the door, waiting for the mule."

"He talked with you, too?"

"I don't remember. That was two years ago."

"Two years is nothing."

"It's long enough to get things mixed in your mind. What do you want to know all these things for?"

"Because I'm thinking about my father."

"You think too much about him. Shall I call Mélanie?"

"Not yet, *Mama*, not yet."

Had she said too much? She attempted to retreat:

"Maybe your Uncle Benoît was not there."

"He was standing by the door, waiting to unload the mule."

"I'm not sure. You could ask him."

A pause, after which Etienne murmured, hardly above a whisper:

"You'd better call Mélanie."

"You're a sensible boy. Thank you."

She got up and walked away, and shortly after I heard her musical voice calling to the girl.

I, who knew so much, realized what was passing in the mind and heart of the boy. He had discovered what he wanted to know. Once more, Dalilah had betrayed Samson. Etienne and I had been together on the occasion when I had reminded Benoît of Claude's last descent: "You must have seen him as he walked past your châlet on his way to Bonneval?" and Benoît, laying down *his* chamois, had denied seeing him, turning toward the animal to avoid my eye. Why had he denied meeting his brother? Simply in order to prove that he knew nothing of Claude's nocturnal trip. And the crime must obviously have been premeditated: the place chosen for its execution and the attack from the rear, proved that. This denial had surprised Etienne, and at the same time brought his examination to an abrupt conclusion. That is why he had turned to his mother. He had

long hesitated to ask that question, allowing her rather to chatter on and try to persuade him to let the matter rest. But she had herself provoked the asking of the fatal question by making that odious comparison.

It was from a feeling of sympathy, and not idle curiosity, that I leaned over the balcony. Etienne's face was hidden in his hands; he was crying. The people of this district rarely weep, though in the presence of death it is customary to utter cries. Etienne had silently given in to his sorrow. His training at the seminary had no doubt predisposed him to feel the subtle refinements of mental suffering. What was he crying about? It was because the proofs he had acquired had come from his own mother, his *mama*. I was tempted to go down, take him in my arms and console him, this boy whose burden was too heavy for the shoulders of youth. But I couldn't. That would have meant that I knew everything—Benoît's crime and Maddalena's.

Stealthy steps were heard coming around the house, at which both of us, he below and I at my window, were startled. I had just time to see Etienne jump to his feet before I returned to my room. It was only Mélanie. Happy, gracious, charming, and blushing to the roots of her hair (thus I pictured her), she was coming to her melancholy betrothal. She found Etienne in tears.

"Are you angry, Etienne, or don't you feel well?"

"Oh, I am all right." A pause, and then: "So it's true, Mélanie?"

"What, Etienne?"

"That if I ask you to marry me you'll have me?"

"I'm willing."

Another pause. This is their betrothal.

"That's a pretty bouquet you have, Mélanie."

"Do you want it?"

"It's too big. Just give me some of them."

"Those?"

"Yes, those purple ones. They have no smell."

And again they said nothing. A silence prolonged by the increasing embarrassment of the two. It was Etienne who finally broke it:

"You tell *Mama*, will you Mélanie? She'll be glad."

Then, just above a whisper, I heard her sigh:

"So soon!"

That was all.

The love scene was over. They did not even kiss. I wondered whether Etienne had not accepted his mother's plan in order to escape from himself, using his engagement as an excuse to abandon his mission? In that case he too would be dragging his victim down with him, destroying a life that had been confided to his care. *His* hands, then, were no cleaner than those of his

Uncle Benoît. Etienne's were more delicate, perhaps, but strong enough indeed to strangle a bird.

I was now free to show myself, and when I stepped out on to the balcony I saw the couple walking away. They walked side by side, but not holding hands. He was tall and thin though there was a certain robust power in his flexible and agile body. But how faintly did she resemble the portrait drawn by Maddalena! Her feet scarcely touched the ground. I could just catch sight of her delicate profile, proclaiming the purity and nobility of her soul. There was nothing of the Italian in her, she was the product of a race at once laborious and spiritual, hard-headed and mystical. To what sufferings was she doomed, poor child!

That evening before leaving for Bessans with Maddalena and her mule, Mélanie ran in to kiss her father, who was standing at the door of his kitchen. As she kissed those unshaven cheeks she glanced at Etienne. The good Sérafín received the kiss without knowing that it had been intended for his daughter's betrothed.

Sérafín had not been told the news, nor had anyone else. I could not understand the reason for this secrecy. Perhaps Etienne had insisted on it.

After dinner, when I had gone as usual into the beater's room to smoke a pipe and talk over the hunt, I tried to catch the eyes of Etienne, which

were riveted upon Benoît. Did he consider the proofs he had just acquired insufficient? She who had given them would deny them at the slightest nod from her accomplice. Yet he had no doubts, I was sure of that. How would he attempt to strike the murderer? Directly, or through a legal accusation? If through legal channels, I would of course give testimony on that detail of Benoît's wet clothes. But after all, had he not given up his plans, and was not this day of his betrothal a prelude to his final abdication? Was he merely taking a last look at his prey?

A few days afterward I returned to Chambéry. My vacation was over. Although I had done my utmost to discourage Etienne from further pursuit, he had told me nothing of his plans for the future. Just before I left, as he was helping me to strap my bags and pack my rifles, I made a last attempt to get something out of him:

"Are you still anxious to attain your majority before you reach the legal age?"

"Yes, Monsieur l'Avocat."

"How about marriage as a means to bringing it about?"

"Perhaps, Monsieur l'Avocat."

"With Mélanie Ruffin?"

"With Mélanie."

"Splendid! My congratulations. She's a fine, capable girl, and very pretty to boot. May I come to the wedding feast?"

"The wedding feast? Such things are not for you, Monsieur l'Avocat."

"I'll come all the same, if you'll invite me."

"All right, Monsieur l'Avocat."

"Well, you may count on me, young man."

Did I make that last sentence sound too solemn? He turned the whites of his eyes toward me, as if trying to penetrate some hidden meaning. Were we not sharers of the same secret, from that day when we had seen Benoît strangle the chamois? When my bags were packed, and the mules had started on the road, I stopped to shake hands with each of my beaters, telling them that I hoped to see them all next year. Etienne stood by, waiting to see how I would behave to Benoît, who stood last in line. I could feel that he was looking at me. What could I do other than shake his hand as I had that of the others, and turn away, not looking behind me? I burned with shame fearing I knew not what, after shaking hands with the murderer. It was a matter of keen regret that I had not been able to carry with me a last visual impression of my cabin, my frail little wooden châlet hidden away among the gigantic rock walls of the Albaron and the Charbonel.

## CHAPTER IX

### HAMLET'S BETROTHAL

THE charming custom of betrothal ceremonies is still observed in Savoy. The young people go to church accompanied by their families, and in the presence of the priest make their formal exchange of vows. From the moment of the priest's blessing, the engaged couple are considered as practically married, and cannot break the engagement without perjury. They may not, however, spend a night together under the same roof until after the marriage is consecrated.

A month after my departure in October, I received a well-written letter from Etienne inviting me to the betrothal, which was set for All Saints' Day. The marriage was not to take place before winter. It was wiser therefore to undertake the trip on November first, since later on the roads would be impassable. Etienne was counting on my presence.

I set out from Chambéry in one of those soft autumnal mists that vanish toward midday, leaving a bright clear Italian sky overhead. As my carriage reached the wild summit of the little ridge of La Madeleine, between Lanslevillard and

Bessans, my eyes feasted on the familiar landscape—the broad Valley of the Arc, the church steeple glistening in the sun, and my beloved mountains covered half-way down with a powder of snow. The late season added novelty to the scene. Up to the snow-belt everything was gold, pale gold and dull of the birches, mellow gold of the oaks, red gold of the beeches, fiery gold of the willows stretching along the banks of the stream, yellow gold of the thickets, scarlet gold of the tufted bilberries, and finally pure virgin gold of the larch forests contrasting with the sombre green of the pines. The incomparable richness of this tapestry, with the colors passing in gradation from green to purple, stood out in sharp relief against the lowest reaches of the snow that sprang into life under the quickening rays of the sun. Autumn and winter struggled for possession of the mountains, each outvying the other in the magnificence of its apparel.

The church at Bessans, as you know, stands on a knoll above the town, dominating the little agglomeration of houses. The path leading up to it passes by a crucifix rising up gaunt against the background of the Valley; the figure of Christ reminds you of those tragic Spanish Christs crushed under a burden of sorrow, as if they had been bent and stiffened to the task of bearing the cross. The cemetery clusters round the little Chapel of St. Antoine. From a point of vantage

on this knoll I watched the people coming up to celebrate All Saints' Mass, the townsfolk of Bessans, and a sprinkling of others from neighboring villages. Women from the valleys of Averole and Ribon, who lived some distance away, came on asses and mules. It was pleasant to watch them leap down so lightly from their saddles, even the aged matrons. They all dressed in the sombre costume of Bessans. Some had added shawls, or aprons embroidered in brown or blue. Every face was shaded by the black tulle bonnet, and the younger women wore red or orange ribbons. A few had put on family jewels—a golden heart or a cross suspended from a velvet ribbon, or other heavy gold ornaments. The men wore hats adorned with steel buckles, red or green belts, short jackets with metal buttons, colored waistcoats with yellow buttons and red lace trimmings. Not all the men, however, for many of them—especially those who had done military service and knew the ways of cities—had donned the conventional black suit. Had it not been for this treason toward local custom, you might have thought yourself in a bygone age, in the days when the Clapiers painted wooden church ornaments, or mounted mystery plays in the Chapel of St. Antoine, before the good people of Bessans assembled to see the stable where Christ was born.

The cemetery at my feet had been transformed into a garden in honor of the dead. The tombs

were smothered under heaps of chrysanthemums that had been brought that morning and symmetrically arranged with the utmost care. One poor old woman dismounted from her mule and carried in a magnificent armful of gorgeously colored boughs. They were an offering to her dead. The tomb on which she laid them shone resplendent above all the others; it glistened with the golden splendor of a candelabrum on the high altar.

I turned and looked in the opposite direction: the whole mountain resembled a gigantic garden.

The betrothal ceremony was celebrated after mass in a side chapel, and, except for myself, only the immediate members of the two families were present. Conforming to the ancient tradition, Etienne and Mélanie had dressed in the appropriate costumes. They were a charming couple, graceful, young, supple. My heart went out to them, and I felt considerable apprehension about their future. For how long would they tread the path of peace and happiness? Had indeed all hatred and vengeance been stifled in the boy's heart, and had his love for Mélanie effectually taken their place? I could not help watching him and trying to guess his thoughts. But his features were set, his lips tightly closed, and I could read nothing in his expression. I thought I saw his hand tremble when the priest asked him to take Mélanie's. The girl raised her head ecstatically toward the man at her side, and the halo of her

head-dress completed her resemblance to the Virgin. There was something delicate and distinguished in her pallor that was accentuated by the fresh pinkness of her temples and forehead. How different was she from the girl Maddalena had described! How little had the woman understood the girl! It is piety or a boundless mystical love that gives a young girl the air of an angel—a Bernadette of Lourdes or a Mélanie de la Salette, humble shepherdesses who see visions.

Sérafin Ruffin's family included many brothers and sisters, all of whom were present. The mother, however, was dead. The occasion was too much for my poor beater who, except when he was hunting, was a soft-hearted, easy-going fellow; he could not restrain the tears, which he brushed away with his huge thumb as he would an importunate insect. Rina clung to Mélanie, as if she felt it her duty to help the future wife of Etienne, her guide and her idol. My eyes next fixed on Jean-Marie, a healthy grown-up lad of fifteen. Why was I so attentive to him? I was looking for the resemblance! To Claude, or to Benoît? That mouth surely, and those ears lying flat against the head, were indubitably Benoît's, but were not his jovial aspect, round face and dumpy features, the very antithesis of the sharp bony face of Benoît? On the other hand, roundness of features often comes from good soup, and joviality from a happy childhood. Before his

death Claude was able to give his own imprint, as it were, to the impressionable youngster. This at least was what I saw in Jean-Marie's pleasant face. He interested me; he was a new element—the last—in this family drama, for Etienne had abdicated.

But had he? Surely his uncle and mother were convinced of it. They both looked infinitely relieved. Or did I only imagine it? Maddalena had put on a bright ribbon—was it not fitting after two years of widowhood—one of those fire-tinted ribbons she used to be so fond of, casting its color over her head-dress, and falling down over her neck, tinting the upper part of her waist. She was once more beginning to experience the joy of life.

After the priest's benediction we left the church in a body. There remained only the dinner at Etienne's home, at which I was the sole outside guest. As Mélanie stepped out of the church she took Etienne by the arm, and pointing to the cemetery:

"Would you like to go?" she asked.

She had lavished all her care and love of flowers on the decoration of Claude's grave. Now she wished to show Etienne what she had done, to associate their present happiness with the other sacred memory. How was she to know that it was wrong to take Hamlet to the cemetery? Was it not there that he would hear strange counsels

and utter fatally reasonable words? She had given in to a natural impulse of sympathy and generosity, for her loving intuition had told her of the sorrow in the heart of Claude's son. But that same intuition was to destroy the happiness that had just been so solemnly promised her. I was startled by his reply:

"Why the cemetery?"

She too was surprised, and did not insist. Suddenly he changed his mind and taking Mélanie by the arm he led her quickly to the grave. I remained where I was, for of course I had no right to follow them. When, together with the families, I started down the hill, I could see them in the cemetery, standing out against the heaps of flowers—she must have been kneeling, for he towered high above her. The great crucifix seemed to cast a shadow of sorrow over the couple while the face of Christ was turned to God in an attitude of supplication.

We sat down to dinner before a long table set in the courtyard surrounded on two sides by the stalls, where the cows, unaccustomed to the sound of so many strange voices, were constantly ringing their little bells. Etienne's expression had entirely changed: he wore that look I had so often seen during his terrible investigations. I was afraid.

The unfortunate incident which I feared must soon happen occurred at this moment. Benoît

was about to take his place opposite Maddalena at the center of the table. It was natural that he should do so and no less natural that Maddalena should sit opposite him: indeed it was their duty on an important occasion of this kind to preside at dinner. As Benoît was about to seat himself, Etienne spoke.

“What are you doing, Uncle Benoît?”

It was Maddalena who answered. She was one of those people who seem destined to say the wrong thing and precipitate scenes.

“He’s going to sit there, Etienne, in your father’s place.”

It was precisely this phrase that had so agitated the boy up at the châlet. Etienne became livid with anger. It was he who was head of the house. He stepped round to where Benoît was standing.

“I am taking my father’s place, and no one else! No one else, you hear, *Mama*, no one else!”

Mélanie clung to her father, looking in terror at the man whom she had never known to be other than quiet and timid. And now he was completely changed, hard and pitiless. It was to this man that she had publicly pledged her heart forever. Maddalena was terrified. I wondered how Benoît, so unaccommodating, so jealous of his rights, would take this public insult. Would he give in to his nephew? And would Etienne hold his tongue? Perhaps this was to be the great de-

nunciation, the execution of Etienne's vengeance? Judging by the violence and hatred of Etienne's attitude I thought the moment had come. This time Etienne, his memories freshly stirred by a visit to the cemetery, his nerves shattered by the renunciation implied by his betrothal, could not restrain himself.

"Come now—" Benoît began, without giving in an inch. The two men stood face to face, almost touching each other.

"Not another word from you!" said the younger.

Etienne was about to speak, and Benoît was silent. I took pity on Mélanie, who looked helplessly in my direction. I could not allow Claude's son to give in to an excess of rage on this occasion. What he might do later was another matter. He would surely regret it. If he wished to accomplish what he considered his filial duty, he must not undertake it under the influence of sudden madness. To the relief of the entire company I quietly intervened:

"Come now, Etienne, you musn't lose your temper. Here you are boiling over like milk soup. You must know that if your mother didn't put you in the center, it was because you ought to be next to Mélanie. She didn't want you to have to bother with any one else during dinner. Benoît realizes that it is only the son who takes the place of the

father. He will give you his place with the greatest pleasure. Won't you, Benoît?"

I spoke with amiable courtesy, with an air of friendliness intended to put an end to the discussion. As a host enjoying Maurienne hospitality, as an old friend of the family, and as a lawyer, I enjoyed a certain prestige. Above all, Benoît and Maddalena had suddenly realized the danger that threatened them. The only proof I had of this was their expressions: they were like animals at bay. In that room there were four of us who knew the truth. Benoît immediately accepted my suggestion and went to the foot of the table, murmuring, to save his face:

"Just as you say, Monsieur l'Avocat."

Etienne, perceiving his mother's terror, said nothing.

This incident cast a shadow over the first part of the dinner; but this was gradually dispelled by a succession of succulent dishes and the uncorking of numberless bottles of wine. The Ruffins, whose appetites were in no wise diminished, fell to with infinite zest, showing no consideration whatsoever for the pig (prematurely killed long before Christmas) which made its entrance from the kitchen in every imaginable form—sausages, chops, ham, and the rest. I had brought many of those choice vintages which had pleased Jean-Pierre at Chambéry; on this occasion I need scarcely say, they were slighted by no one. At

dessert I proposed a toast in which I briefly alluded to poor Claude, mainly for the purpose of proving to Etienne that I had not forgotten my faithful comrade. I likewise referred to the hermit of Hautecombe who would, I said, be gratified to know that his family was in no danger of extinction. Finally I praised Mélanie not in the coarse manner of peasants, but with phrases appropriate to her charms. It was at any rate my intention to use light, transparent, and flowing words in describing her. We are often influenced by the praise accorded to those we love, and sometimes in that praise we find new reasons for loving. Even though love can do without reasons it is none the less wise to have a few in reserve. I attempted in this way to point out to Etienne what happiness he might enjoy if he would consent to accept it. Meantime, Mélanie, modest and embarrassed, bent over her plate.

And then there was singing. Sérafin gave us a drinking song and Maddalena, quickly recovering from her emotions, sang an Italian folk-song.

"Now it's your turn," I said to Mélanie. "I have heard you singing when you gathered flowers in our fields. I could hear you distinctly from the châlet."

Her white cheeks turned to deepest red. She tried her best to refuse, until her brothers and sisters delivered her into the hands of the enemy by insisting that she had a "very pretty voice."

Without a trace of false timidity she stood up and sang an old Bessans Noël, a song centuries old, bright, gay and sparkling. The patois of this region cannot be transcribed. Those who have tried to do so have never succeeded, for it is a living spoken language without rules or syntax. Its soul is in the trembling of an accent, like leaves in a wind. Here is the Noël translated as well as uninspired scholars can do it:<sup>6</sup>

### BESSANS NOËL

"You who are in your houses—as snug as marmots—don't put on your boots—just take your sabots—go outdoors: and there you'll find something wonderful;—you'll see clearer than you do at noon;—go out and you'll see angels—they're greeting everybody.

"They're up there on green Clapey—all the way across the happy Aiguille,—they're singing a beautiful motif—by heart, without reading it.—Run and ask Father Pierre—who knows some Latin—ask him to explain the mystery:—*Gloria in excelsis Deo.*

"They have sung this song—at least twenty-five times—but we still listen to it,—we don't understand what they are saying—Ask them a little favor—that before they leave that place—they

<sup>6</sup> See *Chansons des Alpes, Savoie et Dauphiné*, collected by Julien Tiersot (Ducloz, printer, Moûtiers.)

sing in Bessanais—not one time, but two or three.”

“Green Clapey” is the prairie whence came the shepherds bringing to the Infant Jesus their gifts of milk, eggs, cheese, chickens, white partridges, a young lamb, and their hearts as well. This field is above Bessans, and every one knows it was there in a stable that the Virgin was brought to bed.

Mélanie’s voice was a trifle thin but it had an agreeable quality, and above all a freshness to which the fashionable singers I heard at Aix during the season had entirely unaccustomed me. Her youthful voice lingered over each finale with a soft, sweet effect. Her reward was the look that Etienne gave her. I had seen that same look on his face during Mass at church, especially during the Elevation of the Host. It must have been that the music touched a sympathetic chord somewhere in his seminaristic soul.

Evening had fallen during the little family concert. It comes quickly to these narrow valleys in November. A last ray of light filtered in through the windows, and fell on Mélanie, who sat down after the song.

I imagined that she had been especially designated as the harbinger of peace in this tragic house. I could now depart without fear of the future. I was confident that nothing serious would now occur. Etienne was bound to submit to the

yoke imposed by his lovely companion; he would no longer be haunted by the vision of his murdered father; this time Ophelia would triumph over Hamlet. This was the best solution after all, for how could Etienne punish the murderer without at the same time striking the murderer's accomplice, his own mother? On the other hand, here were murder and incest going unpunished, and the criminals taking possession of the house, for there was no doubt Benoît would in the end take the place he had temporarily relinquished.

I left with mixed feelings of reassurance and disgust, intending to spend the first night at Lanslevillard, and proceed to Modane, where I took the train for Chambéry next day.

About Christmas, when I had expected news of the marriage, I received a letter from Etienne; it revealed the boy's embarrassment and informed me that the wedding had been postponed until spring. His reason for writing was to ask me to demand of his mother in writing the formalities necessary for his legal emancipation. He wished to take this step not so much for his own sake as for that of Rina, who was just eighteen. The idea was really absurd, as Etienne's legal status would remain practically unchanged. To me it indicated simply his mental restlessness.

This letter gave the last blow to all my optimism. Claude's son was once again the prey of doubt and worry and suspicion. Separated from

him as I was, I probably magnified his torment. At any rate I did what he asked, and replied to all his questions, slipping in at the end a few affectionate remarks and compliments for Mélanie.

I asked myself whether the wedding would really take place in the spring?

When spring came, I was surprised by a visit from Etienne, who entered my office followed by a young woman who, I felt sure, must be his wife. The two had evidently come to see me on their honeymoon. But the woman was Rina, not Mélanie. Brother and sister stood before me without opening their mouths.

"Well, Etienne, not married yet?"

"Oh no, Monsieur l'Avocat. We've come to say good-bye. You've been so good to us."

"Never mind my goodness. You're going away? Both of you?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"To Paris."

"Paris! What are you going to do there? And when are you returning?"

I was then reminded of another visit—Jean-Pierre's: both were made *for the same reason*. The young people were leaving their home, attempting to escape from the nightmare. I now understood far better than before, the motives of the old man's departure. If Etienne had come to me alone I should perhaps have heard his con-

fession, but the presence of the innocent Rina forbade any exchange of confidences. She could not have known the truth, her face was so calm and untroubled. In this instance she was blindly following her brother, submitting to his every wish.

It was incumbent upon me to ask further questions:

"I take it you both have religious vocations?"

"Maybe, Monsieur l'Avocat."

"Both of you?"

"Both of us."

I managed to learn that he was entering a Lazarist Foreign Missions Seminary, and she the Novitiate in the Rue du Bac, where she would eventually take the hood of a Sister of Mercy. They had perfected their plans together during the long winter evenings. The time Etienne had spent at the Seminary had left a deep impression upon him which had been strengthened by his doubts and tribulations. The church was his refuge, and into the church he was now leading his sister, an unselfish, unreflecting girl. She was grateful to her brother for taking the trouble to plan her life for her.

They were both destined to go to China which they heard a great deal about from missionaries, who had either described it in letters or related in person the magic wonders of the Far East.

Like Jean-Pierre, they too wished to set their affairs in order before leaving. That explained

Etienne's desire for emancipation, as he believed it would enable him to dispose of his property. Actually, it could not annul his legal status as a minor. Etienne, according to his grandfather's last wishes, was owner of the greater part of the family property. He and Rina wanted to leave everything to Jean-Marie.

"At your death?"

"No. Right now. We don't want to take anything with us."

They felt that the money was tainted, that was clear.

It was with some difficulty that I regularized the last wishes of these emancipated minors. I drew up a document by which they gave up all claim to their property in favor of their younger brother, and sent them to a notary to make out the act in proper form. This would serve as a basis for the long and complicated series of documents which was necessary because of the exceptional circumstances. Then I asked them both to dinner, but they refused: they had not time before the train left. Just as they were leaving I addressed Etienne:

"Well, Etienne, what about Mélanie?"

My very natural question agitated him. Had he hoped I would not ask? I knew it would cause him a certain remorse, for it reminded him of happiness lost at the moment he seemed about to enjoy it.

“Mélanie”—he began, lingering on the name as if he were pronouncing a forbidden word for the last time.

“She must be heart-broken, poor child!”

He protested:

“She doesn't want me. I explained.”

What had he explained? Had he told her his secret in order to justify breaking off the engagement? Unthinkable. Mélanie surely would have trusted or even forgiven him without being told, no matter what the effort cost her. She was one of those women who allow their hearts to be torn out rather than utter a complaint or a protest, because they understand nothing but love.

“There may soon be another marriage up there,” he muttered between his teeth.

I guessed his meaning, and said no more. So that was why he was going!

‘And I kissed these two as I had kissed their grandfather. I would never see them again, I meditated, and I *alone* knew the secret reason for their vocation.

“Good-bye, Etienne—good-by, Rina.” I was more deeply moved than I dared admit to myself. I said little, for it was my duty to respect the wishes of the young man who had decided not to reveal the secret, the weight of which rested on his shoulders alone. Indeed, it seemed, as the old man had said, that those shoulders were not broad

enough, and as though he were at last asking help where help is never refused.

I watched brother and sister descend the stairs. They too, like Jean-Pierre, were paying the price. I turnd back and called to mind the great figure of Christ on the cross at Bessans, his body bent under the avalanche of human sorrow, but with his head high.

## CHAPTER X

### IN THE CAVES OF THE AISNE

I HAD not been to Bessans for many years.

Some time after the departure of Etienne and Rina I learned of the marriage of Maddalena and Benoît. Nobody of course was surprised; the two could not otherwise have continued to live together under the same roof. It was, besides, a matter of great practical convenience, as it put a stop to village gossip, facilitated the handling of the property—which had not been divided—and enabled Jean-Marie to profit from Benoît's instruction in matters of farm-management. The peasant who brought me this news descended at great length on the many excellent reasons for the marriage, and gave me the impression that he was anxious to convince me of their validity.

So the murderer and his accomplice were living their life together, unpunished, respected by the community, rid at last of every member of the household who might pass judgment on them, accompanied only by one boy, the fruit possibly of their guilty passion, a boy whose youth and temperament prevented his inquiring too closely into the past. As for myself, I could do nothing: I could not accuse them without betraying the secret of Jean-Pierre's sacrifice and that of

Etienne and Rina. But I made up my mind not to be a witness of their prosperity, or a party to it, so I gave up my hunting lease at La Lombarde. Henceforth I hunted with Vimines and Laval on their preserves in the Dauphiné on the shores of Lake Lovitel.

Then came the War, overshadowing the drama of the Couvert House, as it overshadowed many another. As a result of one of those fortuitous circumstances which seem foreordained and which Joseph de Maistre would attribute to supernatural design, I was to meet during the struggle the last descendant of Jean-Pierre, and through him to witness the unexpected dénouement of that drama.

You will remember how after the military complications of May and June, 1917, were ultimately solved by the adoption of a unified command, the armies were restored to their earlier morale, and to confidence by the victories at Verdun and La Malmaison. I had been attached to the Headquarters of the 11th Corps then under the command of General Maud'huy and was present at the taking of the Fort of La Malmaison. It was there that I met Jean-Marie Couvert. It was so natural, so providential, and at the same time so strange.

Do I owe the extraordinary clarity of my impressions on this occasion to that happy episode of martial victory?

General Maud'huy had put me on his staff out

of pure friendship, because I had answered the call to arms after the manner of the old tales of chivalry, for I was an assiduous reader of Bézier's *Légendes Épiques* and knew by heart whole passages of the *Quatre fils Aymon* and the *Chanson de Roland*. The general was also an enthusiast, loving as I did the old *chansons de geste*. He was fond of quoting to me those parts of the *Quatre fils Aymon* that treat of honor and filial respect and the brotherhood of arms. He took particular pleasure in telling of Tristan's master who taught him never to tell a lie.

"That," he added, "explains the quality of his love for Yseult."

He often took me with him on his tours of inspection. The moment the men caught sight of the wiry little man, straight as an arrow, broad-shouldered, precise, his pipe in his mouth, you could feel every man thrill with the knowledge that all was well. He chatted with his men with the utmost freedom and good-humor, and distributed tobacco on all occasions. He must have spent a fortune on that. A word from him, or a gesture, brought gaiety to the most stolid soldiers, for his word was the right word, and his gesture the right gesture. He must have derived from Merlin his power to transform the character and spirit of places: at his coming the trenches assumed an entirely new aspect. The secret of his miraculous power lay, of course, in his heart.

I was again with the General when he was forced back along the edge of the Forest of Villers-Cotterets during the great German offensive at the Aisne. He held the Forest. Had the enemy managed to penetrate, it would have meant immediate danger for Compiègne and a free road to Paris. But whether in joy or anxiety, victory or retreat, his magic charm never failed. He might be worn out with fatigue and worry, but his magnificent soul ever dominated the flesh. His mind was as alert, and his soul as fresh and inspired, under the most adverse conditions. Though he spoke to everybody he never confused one man with another; he remembered the features of everyone he saw. There were no anonymous units for him, only brothers-in-arms. "I collect eyes," he told me on the eve of La Malmaison. "I have seen many since the beginning of the War. I could write its history on the basis of the eyes alone. There are the eyes of faith and hope, that was at the beginning; eyes of infinite anguish during the retreat from Sarrebourg; triumphant eyes after the Marne, but with a touch of gravity, expressing doubt as to the decisive importance of the victory; indifferent eyes that had seen the mud and misery of 1915; terrible and determined eyes at Verdun—those were the fiercest eyes of all; and eyes almost discouraged by that tragic May of last year. But now I seem to see ardent eyes that have had their faith re-

stored. La Malmaison and the Chemin des Dames will be ours."

And he added a short quotation from one of the innumerable books he had read:

"Do you remember, in *War and Peace*, that page on Borodino? Prince André says to Peter Bezoukov: 'Victory has never depended and never will depend upon position, weapons, or numbers.' 'Upon what then does it depend?' 'It depends upon my feelings and upon the feelings of each soldier.' "

I took advantage of the General's amiable humor to ask him a favor:

"I should like to see these *feelings* in operation, General. Will you allow me to observe at first-hand?"

"If you promise you will do your best to come back and tell me about it! With whom do you want to march?"

"With the *Chasseurs*. There are doubtless a number of Savoyards among them."

"True. You want to be with your own people. However the 4th Zouaves are going to attack the Fort."

"Then I'll go with the 4th Zouaves. I know the Commandant, Clermont-Tonnerre."

"So you know Clermont?"

"I knew him before the War—I did social work with him. But you'll allow me to visit the *Chasseurs* before, won't you, General?"

"Of course. I wish I were going with you! But I must finish working out some details."

The General's Corps consisted of two Divisions, the 38th, composed of sharpshooters and Zouaves, and the 66th, *Chasseur* Battalions. It was the business of this Corps to capture the Chemin des Dames, which runs along the foot of the old dismantled Fort of La Malmaison, and then to reach the Ailette. The Chemin des Dames is a long ridge with spurs shooting out from it at right-angles; it is very much like some animals with an abnormally elongated back, and any number of feet. Now this ridge, lying between the Aisne and the Ailette, is a decidedly important military obstacle, rendered doubly difficult by the configuration of this part of the Laonnois, a region of caves, abandoned quarries and huge subterranean mushroom-beds, sometimes deep and wide enough to hold an entire regiment. In order, therefore, to conquer such terrain you must work not only above but under the ground.

The dismantled Fort of La Malmaison dominates the whole of that sloping plateau. The Giraud Battalion of 4th Zouaves was to undertake the attack.

"I'm going to call that post over there the *Josephine Post*," said Commandant. "Allow me to invite you to tea."

"I accept with pleasure."

The Zouaves were to be supported on the right

by a battalion of sharpshooters that would occupy the Orme Farm, and by the 6th Battalion of *Chasseurs*, operating against the Bois de Veau. The Avricourt Cave on the Mont-sans-Pain Plateau now served as a post for the staff of young Colonel Besson commanding the 4th Zouaves, which had fought at Montceau-les-Provins, Ypres, Vaux-Chapitre, Douaumont, Louvemont and Hurtebise. What glories do these names evoke! Do they not alone equal the glories of the *Grande Armée*? From Avricourt it was my intention to go on the evening before the attack to the plateau where the Hameret farm was situated, to the Cave of Le Caïd, and the Penguin Quarry, where the 6th Battalion was then stationed. Commandant Frère, who was in command and too busy at the time to receive me, turned me over to his adjutant, Captain Chalumeau. Together with him I made the rounds, distributing the General's tobacco, and doing my best to encourage the men, stationed everywhere in caves and grottoes. I inquired about my fellow-provincials and found a good many of them. To these I was especially generous. The volunteer Savoyard contingents had been made into foot *Chasseurs*. As we stopped before the quarters of one company, the Captain answered my question:

“Savoyards? Only one here, I think, but he’s a good one. Little Couvert.”

“Jean-Marie Couvert from Bessans in the Maurienne?”

"Do you know him? We'll have him called."

While one of the men went off to find Jean-Marie, the Captain, whom I had thought a rather stolid and indifferent type, gave me an example of "spiritual paternity," that intimate relationship between officer and man which is the glory of our Army.

"So little Couvert is a compatriot. Then he shan't go."

"Has he done anything wrong, Captain?"

"On the contrary, I am well pleased with him. He's the life and soul of the Company, or rather *was*. He was a happy, rollicking boy, clever as the devil with his hands; he's as good at carving canes and making aluminum rings as he is at clipping barbed wire or throwing hand-grenades; he cooks better than anybody else, sings songs of his native district, and by George, he can wiggle his ears and forehead besides! He's a real treasure. I don't know what the men would do without him."

My companion could not help realizing the pleasure he gave me by his description of Jean-Marie. It was, you see, a portrait of Claude. The resemblance between father and son was unmistakable. There was not a trace of Benoît. No, *that* idea was preposterous.

"A first-rate soldier, then," I said.

"Yes, but now he's altogether changed. I

hardly recognise him. He seems worried, sad, touchy. He speaks to nobody. I asked him if he were sick, and even had him examined. There was nothing the matter: he was simply a changed man. I can't explain it. He now volunteers—*asks* to be sent on the most dangerous missions. To-night, for instance, he is one of a patrol sent out to explore the Casse-tête trench.

"Well, the boy has nerve."

"My dear friend, soldiers don't usually go out of their way to look for danger. When you're facing death, death all the time, there's no need in pressing the point. No, something's happened to the boy—we don't know what. I've questioned him, but he won't answer. You've known him for so long, try to find out what's the matter. I'm immensely fond of him, I couldn't ask for a better courier. I'm going to send him to-morrow to La Malmaison in order to be sure that our advance synchronizes with that of the Zouaves."

"To the Fort? I may be there myself—I knew the boy very well when he was a great deal younger. How long ago did this change take place?"

"Since his last leave, not long ago. He came back before his time was up. As a rule, you know, the boys return in the pink of perfection. He was in the dumps. A love affair? Had his girl thrown him over while he was away? Such things *will* happen. Good Lord, I don't see why they should

attach so much importance to these little affairs? One woman's about the same as another, don't you think?"

I saw I was dealing with a philosopher to whom sentimental complications meant very little. I thought of another reason for Jean-Marie's sorrow, but I didn't care to mention it. I was now more anxious than ever to see him and ask him questions. I wondered if I would recognise him. Years had passed since I last hunted in the Maurienne, three of which were the dark years of war. My last view of him was at the betrothal of his brother Etienne; he was merely a boy then; I would now find him a grown man. I wondered how he would react to any advances I might make. Would he remember the friend of his grandfather, his father, and his elder brother? Would he be communicative, or silent; cordial, or indifferent?

The cave in which a part of the battalion was massed is so far underground that you can hardly hear a concerted artillery action above. It was divided by nature into a number of separate compartments, and lighted by an improvised electric plant. Here lived a seething horde of men, waiting for orders: *Chasseurs*, engineers, pioneers, stretcher-bearers. Some were playing cards, some eating with that proverbial appetite of the soldier who is always ready to absorb food as if to compensate himself for the days when there is none; some slept, others wrote letters by the light of

small flickering candles. Before me spread out that vast conglomeration of men living a common life, safe in the depths of a cave where one could at least draw a long breath, although the air was scarcely breathable. That there was anguish in the breasts of these men could not be doubted, but there was no evidence of it. The most terrible part, to a sensitive man, was the impossibility of being alone. In war there are no individuals: or rather, the battalion is the only individual. The soldier eats, sleeps, plays, thinks, fights, dies in company with his fellow soldiers. No one, literally, can call his life his own, nor his thoughts, nor his love. I looked into these young faces with mingled feelings of pity and affection. Which of us was sure to be alive on the morrow?

I heard my name spoken and turning round I saw Jean-Marie Couvert. I flashed my little electric torch into his face and was immediately struck by the unmistakable resemblance to his father. He was as like Claude in the flesh as in the spirit—as I was able to judge from the Captain's description of him. My pleasure at this discovery was so evident and my greeting so cordial that the young man immediately unbent. I began by recalling the happy scenes at Bessans and at our chalet in the mountains. I then referred to matters nearer his heart:

“And what’s happened to Etienne? Is he in the army?”

"No, Lieutenant, he was refused."

"Refused, one of our fine healthy Savoyards?"

"On account of his lungs. At least, that's what they said. They didn't really want him. He went to China afterward.

"A missionary?"

"Yes, Lieutenant—to Tientsin. My sister Rina went with him. She's in the hospital there."

"Do you hear from them?"

"Sometimes, Lieutenant. They're pretty far away."

He accompanied this last statement with a vague gesture as if to explain that one had no right to expect news from people who live at the other end of the world. The boy seemed to consider that his brother and sister had definitely gone out of his life. Jean-Marie spoke with that ease of manner which is characteristic of the Maurienne peasants, particularly the inhabitants of the Haute-Maurienne, who own property and are proudly conscious of their independence. But he had neither the education nor the intelligence of his elder brother. It was therefore not to be expected that he would concern himself with the family drama. Besides, Claude's murder was so long ago. I made a rapid mental calculation: it was eight years ago—the ten years necessary to outlaw the crime had not yet elapsed. Why should I bother about it? The past was the past, I had

no business thinking of it. I then asked about the others:

"And what of your grandfather?"

"I don't know anything about him."

"Is he still alive and at Hautecombe?"

"I think so."

"He must be going on seventy-five?—does he write you?"

"Never."

"Are you sure he's not dead?"

"Oh, we'd know that, Lieutenant."

But the old man was dead so far as everyone else was concerned. He had given up his possessions; he no longer counted. He had himself understood this, and gave no sign of life: he had willingly, knowingly, buried himself among the Princes of the House of Savoy.

There was one more question I wanted to ask, a question affecting two people that I had kept to the last. It was a natural question, and I asked it in a perfunctory way:

"And how is your mother, Jean-Marie?"

"*Mama*," he said, as if that single word were a reply in itself.

He was not in a mood for conversation. Perhaps, facing death as he was and appearing to wish it, he had determined not to try to dissimulate anything. Poor boy, he didn't know how unerringly that silence had betrayed his secret.

He too knew, and it was impossible for him to

speak of his mother; he had learned the truth on the occasion of his last leave, from which he had returned a "changed man." Like his elder brother he was faced with the horrible truth, and again like Etienne he was torn between duty and filial reticence. The tragedy of *Hamlet* was beginning all over again.

How had he learned the secret? Had he, like Etienne, spied upon the criminals, or had the light suddenly been revealed to him through their carelessness, by one of those imprudent blunders that even "the cleverest criminals" cannot avoid making? I inclined to the opinion that the discovery was instantaneous, made probably on the occasion of his unexpected return on leave. I was not to learn this until later, and then not fully, but my surmise was in the main correct. I felt sorry for Jean-Marie, believing that I had no right to allow him to perceive my own anxiety. He must not think that I knew the secret.

Or maybe I was wrong, that I had misinterpreted his silence? It may have been no more than resentment toward his mother for re-marrying, or anger at what he considered an intrusion on the part of his stepfather. Or finally, there may have been a quarrel over some question of property. It is always easy to find explanations, and as I have often said, every event presents two aspects.

But I dared not mention Benoît, and brought

the conversation back to commonplaces, asking Jean-Marie whether he were in need of tobacco, brandy, or cash. He deigned to accept, as a favor—the proud Mauriennais—a few bars of chocolate. As he was about to go I laid an affectionate hand on his shoulder.

"Now listen to me, my dear boy. I was your father's friend, and your grandfather's. If *you* need a friend, you may count on me, always."

"Thanks, Lieutenant. I don't need anything."

"You never can tell. Well, you'll do your duty all right, I know. But you'll be careful, won't you?"

On whose behalf could I ask it? You ordinarily ask a young man to be careful for his mother's sake, but could I do this with Jean-Marie?

"You're not engaged to anyone in Bessans, are you?"

"No, Lieutenant."

"Too bad. Well, you'll marry when the war's over. You'll be a wealthy proprietor. You know, that was what your brother and sister wanted."

I was doing my best to interest him in life, but he made no reply. As I could think of nothing more to say, I turned to go.

"There may be one thing you can do, Lieutenant."

"I'll be glad to do it."

"A letter for Etienne."

He took from his pocket a letter which was sealed and addressed.

"Send it to China? Certainly. It'll go sooner if I send it with Headquarters mail."

"No, not that. It's to be sent only in case of —accident."

"I understand. I'll keep it for you. And I hope—there will be no accidents. A mountaineer like you ought to know how to avoid accidents. However, *I* may meet with one before you."

And again he made a vague gesture.

The letter was evidently his will. I tried not to attach too great importance to his presentation, and shook his hand nonchalantly.

"Good-bye. I may see you at La Malmaison tomorrow, if you go with your battalion."

He gave me a searching glance, saluted, and turned away. Yes, he had Jean-Pierre's eyes, and Etienne's; just then they reminded me of the two occasions on which the others had bade me good-bye—they were full of determination, illuminated by an inner light. I had kissed the others, why had I not kissed the last, who was perhaps about to embark on a more distant journey?

"Well?" asked the Captain.

"A fine boy. Keep your eye on him; he'll go anywhere if you'll let him."

"I know, but without his old light-heartedness."

"You can't always be gay."

"Of course not. It's too bad, though."

## CHAPTER XI

### LA MALMAISON

As I left the cave to join the Zouaves on the Mont-sans-Pain Plateau, the evening shadows had begun to hide the already overcast day. The slopes of the Chemin des Dames, to-morrow's objective, looked like phantoms. I could scarcely distinguish the outlines of the old fort on the hill. A Y-shaped tree, dear to the heart of artillery-men who used it in calculating ranges, helped me to make out its position. I knew that the first three lines of German trenches—which we called *Casse-tête*, *Liebnitz*, and *Carabine*—would have to be taken before we could reach the ditches round the fort. I scanned every part of this territory, now almost dark in the approaching evening: yonder was Laon, and beyond that Mézières and the Meuse, the last of the occupied zone. Ah, what if we should be able to catch sight next day of the towers of Laon Cathedral!

Our artillery boomed incessantly. Overhead I heard the constant whirring of our shells. The German answer to this cannonade was not so regular, but it was deadly poisonous.

"We'll have to put on our masks, Lieutenant," said the Zouave who was with me.

The enemy were using that burning gas that eats into the eyes and skin. A company of masked men passed us on the road. They looked diabolic in their Tissot tube masks. The country we were passing through was a haunted region full of evil omens. But what were the sorceries of old compared with the accursed inventions of man?

In order to reach the post at Avricourt we had to pass through the cut of the Intendance, a spot constantly under enemy fire. Parts of this had even caved in. It ran down a steep and difficult slope—just where our manœuvres were to be made on the morrow, and the wounded cared for.

The Avricourt post, hardly 500 meters behind the front, was an abandoned quarry. Two companies now occupied it: Engineers, the Headquarters staff (including couriers) telephone operators—the usual personnel. And of course the stretcher-bearers. They were all crowded into that narrow pit. At night the fighting units must effect their formations there as well.

I watched the men as the General addressed to them a few quiet words: "You are the Victors of Douaumont, you will be the Victors of La Malmaison." There was no doubt of this in the men's minds. They had been *given* the fort, it was

theirs. They would be victors, but not all of them. This is what they think, though the thought is not translated into words. As the hour approaches they chat idly and make their last preparations.

A regiment, like a nation, is composed of the living and the dead. It has its tradition as well as its flag. But this is a regiment among regiments—it is unique. Composed of Algerians at the beginning of the War, it now comprises Zouaves from every province of France and Algeria. But they are always Zouaves. When they are not in action, they proudly wear their distinctive *chechias*, lending vivid touches of red when lighted by the electricity of the caves.

I make haste to join Lieutenant-Colonel Besson, a wonderful officer, a man of calm demeanor with a great heart, and a great expert in the art of military operations. His adjutant, Major de Clermont-Tonnerre, is a man who exerts moral influence through courtesy and a soft persuasive manner, which never deserts him even in the most critical moments. At Hurtebise he was seen taking back into battle a number of his men who had just been relieved, with the same calm assurance and serenity as always!

Here too was the Chaplain, little Père Joyeux, thin and sickly, with hardly a body at all, only a soul.

In a small room lighted with miners' acetylene

lamps, General Giraud is in conference with his staff. It is *his* particular job to take the fort. A long plank supported by saw-horses is his table, and on this is spread out the map, fastened down with thumb-tacks. Behind the officers is a large mirror, brought there by no one knows whom, which reflects the cavernous room to endless lengths.

I sit back a little, not to be in the way, and study the heads. I suppose I acquired my interest in eyes from the Major. He stands up to explains his plans to the others. He is a tall, spare man with steel-blue eyes; a man whose military exploits have already become legendary. He was wounded at Guise early in the war, and left for dead on the field of battle, but managed by a superhuman effort to escape death and capture.

I wonder who is the youngest. Marasquin, who leads the pioneers, or De Champfeu, the cavalry officer with eyes darting fire? I had been told about his arrival in the regiment last year, in time for the engagement on the 16th of April.

He came to the Colonel, who said: "You've arrived sooner than we expected. We're attacking tomorrow; the posts are full. You will therefore take charge of the Divisional Depot, and I'll call you at the first vacancy."

"You are attacking tomorrow and you want me to take charge of the Divisional Depot? Colonel, I come of a race of soldiers. Look at me:

of course you don't know me, but look. Don't ask me to do anything like that." The Colonel took him.

Among these men is a second lieutenant who might well be their grandfather—Villebois-Mareuil, a man of nearly sixty. He took the place of Second-Lieutenant Trincart, who was sixty-four; he was actually called grandfather by the regiment. He had served in 1870, and was killed at La Lizerne, near Ypres, in May, 1915. Villebois-Mareuil, cousin of the famous Colonel of the same name who fell in the Transvaal, enlisted as a stretcher-bearer, but determined to enter the ranks. He was satisfied with his lot, and always smiled like a great lord in his château. He has the dignity of age—and the knowledge that death is not far off.

He now listens calmly, without entering the discussion. Champfeu, on the other hand, cannot restrain his excitement. The group is a Rembrandt picture in chiaroscuro: each face is lighted by a small lamp—they are eager faces, taut faces, faces full of determination and gravity, faces that express submission to the decrees of fate.

Toward midnight the two companies set out to take their positions preparatory to the attack. I go out a moment: the rain is falling, and the constant fire of our batteries has changed to a furious uproar. The night is rent by a terrific cannonading, and the sky is a mass of lightning.

The enemy is comparatively inactive: our men will suffer small losses in entering the trenches. The post seems deserted. Orders ring out sharply, but there is nothing for us to do but wait. We chat together. Major Giraud, who does not join his battalion until 12.50 A.M., tells us about his escape.

He lay for a time wounded at Charleroi, with a bullet in his lung, and was later carried to a neighboring town. The German doctor who treated him, a Major in the Medical Corp, appeared to show a friendly interest, so Giraud asked him to send a letter to his wife, promising that it would contain no details, nothing but personal news of himself. The envelope would of course be unsealed. The Major at first refused. "If I were in your place I'd do the same for you," said the wounded man. "Ah, yes, you gallant Frenchmen!" The next day the German hands the Frenchman an envelope addressed to Giraud's wife. "This will reach her. Put your letter in it." The wounded man did so, and the doctor asked him to seal the envelope.

The letter arrived a month later.

"Yes," continues the narrator, "it arrived. The papers announced my death! But my wife refused to believe it. 'Have they seen his body?' she asked. 'Mortally wounded' was the report. 'That is not sufficient for me.' She had faith, you see."

He speaks in a far-off voice, as if he were in reality a ghost. This persistent refusal to accept death was common in our homes, but how often was fate so kind to others as it had been with Giraud?

In the village near Guise he had been cared for by the mayor's daughter who had gradually collected for him sufficient clothes to dress him in a tramp's outfit. One night he said to her: "I'm ready now. You promised me the key." She hesitates, afraid, and tries to prevent his going, but ends by giving him the key. He manages to escape, making his way at last as a tinker to Saint-Quentin, whence he believes he will have little difficulty in crossing the lines; but since Charleroi there has been the Marne, and sea-fighting, and trench warfare. There is no passing now at any point between the Vosges and the Channel. He must go north into Belgium.

This he did, acting all the while his part of jack-of-all trades—sometimes a groom, sometimes an accountant, sometimes a charcoal-burner, and once as a clown. At length he crossed the Dutch border, returning to France six months later. Such is the man who is to capture La Malmaison. He stands up: an hour has slipped by unperceived during the recital of his adventures. The Colonel kisses him as he leaves, and the two embrace—a quick manly embrace.

"I'll be with you shortly," I told him.

"The *Josephine* post is waiting for us. Tea is served."

Toward three in the morning, after a light breakfast of sardines and jam—for we are all hungry and food restores the spirits—I set out with the Major who is on his way to address his battalion. We make our way up above the quarry. The German batteries have shifted their fire directly upon that point: a terrific fire, as severe as during the worst days at Verdun. Their shells rake the whole terrain between the Mont-sans-Pain Plateau and our front-line trenches. It seems as though the enemy were aware of our intended attack. Our losses will be heavy. And what of the influence upon our morale? It would be impossible to pass through the cut—now filled with soldiers—in order to reach the trenches. We must scale the parapet. We make our way slowly forward, throwing ourselves flat on the ground every time a shell explodes. We are lucky to escape with no more than a shower of earth and stones.

One of the men ahead of me falls—his head blown to pieces. A quick groan—that is all. Another groan behind me—a shoulder wound and the man turns back. There is a dull sensation in one of my arms; by an incredible freak of chance it is only a stone. I feel at once for my portfolio. What would happen to Jean-Marie's letter if an accident occurred? I meant to have left it at the

post, but I forgot. The boy had absolute faith in me, and I had neglected to keep my promise. Well, he'll come back safe and so will I, and I'll return his will to him. One always thinks of others' danger, never of one's own, such is the tenacity of our desire to live. But is this a will? What can he have written to his brother? The family secret is perhaps in this envelope, and I shall never know it through any direct confession, or learn it by any witness.

Making my way through the darkness torn by sudden flashes, under a continuous hail of steel and earth, and occasionally stumbling over the dead, is an occupation that requires every atom of my attention. Here are the three lines of trenches. My eyes, at last accustomed to the darkness, can just make out the long lines of earth. Our men are there, packed one against another, silent, moveless. No knapsacks are carried—they are too heavy for quick movement—but round his body each man carries a *musette*, provided with food and hand-grenades which give him a silhouette like a lozenge. From time to time a star-shell goes up from the German lines, showing in every detail the picture of our expectant soldiers. Some of them fasten their eyes upon the intermittently appearing objective, the filigree ruins standing above the line of the horizon; but for the most part the men seem indifferent, concerned only in finding the least un-

comfortable resting positions. Leaning against the earth embankments, bent down, or even lying on top of each other, they doze for a moment or two. An occasional word is spoken, but there is no conversation. Everyone does his own thinking, though he is quite willing to receive physical support from his comrade. There is no single isolated being; this Battalion is one, and from its oneness each individual takes his courage and his strength.

In this multifarious assembly I catch sight of the Chaplain as well as Captain Champfeu, impatiently champing his bit. He is standing upright on the parapet, as if the shells falling round us were not intended for him. Louis de Clermont-Tonnerre is looking for the faces of comrades, the men who love him. He then returns to his post at the Colonel's side.

It is 5.05; Major Giraud rises to his feet. I am surprised when I look at my watch: it can't be so late! The Major looks over the parapet. The men standing beside him think this is the signal, and a telepathic message goes along the line. "Not yet," says the Major, and quietly the men resume their positions.

What was he looking at? The day is long in coming, the night is still pitch black, and a fine drizzle is falling. It will be difficult to advance in the dark, and infinite precautions must be taken

to keep the proper formation, but the march will be slow—that has been arranged for.

5:15. This time the hour has come. Again the tall Major rises and at once without a spoken word everyone is ready. And then—going over! It's not what one imagines it: a headlong rush to victory. It is a simple and quiet affair. You must first make your way as best you can up the little steps leading to the parapet. Many soldiers mount it either at a leap or by hoisting each other up. Then you rather guess than see a thousand shadows, regular links in an endless chain, swarming over and forming ranks on the top. There is not a work spoken, as amid bursting shells the men begin their orderly march. With their grotesque burdens they look like peasants setting out for a fair before daybreak. Or hardly that: theirs is the tranquillity and calculated order of some sacred ceremony. There is no hesitation as they fall into formation the moment they clear the parapet. Occasionally a man is hit—he utters a groan and falls. A matter of small importance, provided it does not retard the advance of the whole body.

Slowly objects begin to emerge from the shadows of night, which has concealed the perfect order of the march, its method and carefully planned manœuvring. Now, a few steps away, I catch sight of the long line and the close-packed columns. The star-shells cast their reflections on

the steel helmets, masses of which suddenly sink into the earth and as suddenly emerge: men marching through shell-holes. This quiet, persistent orderly march is the attack.

The rain has stopped, but will the sun ever rise? Why the devil couldn't we have had clear weather! Over this scarred and battered terrain, full of shell-holes and pits, the Zouaves advance just behind the barrage, with the regularity of clock-work. From time to time a muffled "go easy!" from the officers restrains a man who is in too great a hurry. You can't go ahead of your artillery.

We send up no star-shells. The advance is a little retarded by the darkness; men stumble. It is almost impossible to do anything under the heavy bombardment, but after an advance of two or three hundred meters the rain of shells is not quite so heavy.

We gain the *Casse-tête* trench, already destroyed by our fire; the entire first line is now no doubt in our hands. The *Leibnitz* is also almost totally demolished; there again we find little opposition. But the enemy has placed sharpshooters in shell-holes and our Zouaves are attacked from the rear. But we continue our advance without turning round. A special company has been detailed to clear out the sharpshooters' nests.

The Germans now send up a continuous stream of red star-shells. They frantically signal their

own artillery to shorten range in order to protect them from the oncoming assault. Their luminous signals appear and disappear, the graceful arcs meeting and crossing in the air. To our right we see green signals. Meantime our fire is directed upon the Fort—incendiary shells that burst into red flames, behind which the ruined Fort is seen looming out of the blackness. The Fort is now a perfect objective. A regiment of Moroccan Colonials, marching in our direction, supports the left, while the *Chasseurs* come up on the right. The Zouaves, holding the center, push relentlessly forward.

The mad mingling of signals, bursting incendiary shells, and the first rays of dawn make a soul-stirring picture. To the booming of artillery, the tick-tack of sharp-shooters and the cries of the wounded, the attacking body steadily advances.

At the *Carabine* trench, just at the foot of the Fort, there is determined resistance. This is soon overcome and the attack on the Fort begins. The men are so near that they are unable to distinguish the component parts of the Fort: La Malmaison to the men just below it, is merely a blot in the surrounding darkness. Isolated in this way, it is easily defended. These difficulties have naturally been foreseen and the battalion begins manœuvring. It is first necessary to take the ruined outer walls, then the turrets, then the inner walls. The Fort itself once taken, it is still

necessary to descend into the caves, the dungeons, wherever sharp-shooters might be stationed.

The two companies ahead, followed by a company of sharp-shooters, having surrounded the Fort to the east and west, now march through the breeches made by our heavy guns. The first man to enter the breech was a peasant from Poitou, called Barre. He was a married Reservist, a quiet fellow, who never sought adventure, one of those level-headed men who was quite willing to keep in line during the advance.

There is some fighting inside the Fort. Six or eight German sharp-shooters have been stationed here and there, and threaten serious trouble. The rapidity of our attack, however, has taken them unawares and they are soon put out of business.

“Six o’clock. “At six I will be master of the Fort” was what the Major had promised. And at six he *was* master of the Fort. He starts to send up the tri-color star-shell which was the signal agreed upon, but the fuse fails to work. A Zouave mounts the wall and plants on it the tri-color flag, while the following message is signaled: *Objective attained.* The news is received at Avricourt and sent thence by telephone and wireless from post to post, to the division, the Corps, and then to General Headquarters. Finally it reaches Paris and is flashed to all of France.

The Division airman, at six o’clock sharp, flies

over the Fort and makes his observations on the new post. The sun rises at last over the Fort with its little flag floating in the breeze, while the airplane describes great circles overhead.

In the distance we catch sight of the towers of Laon Cathedral.

The taking of La Malmaison was only one episode in a battle that was fought all the way between the Moulin de Laffaux and La Royne. But it was an indication of victory, a hard and bloody victory won by the right wing, including the Zouaves, the Sharp-shooters and the *Chasseurs*. Our losses were heavy. We soon had particulars on the casualties among officers: Villebois-Mareuil was killed during the march; Marasquin, too, though I thought he had only been wounded; Champfeu stationed his sharp-shooters at the Fort, but immediately after he was showered by shells and fell wounded in the thigh and head. I had seen him as they carried him off. He raised himself on his elbow and turned to me:

“That was a first-rate attack, wasn’t it?”

The other battalions were to go beyond the Fort and take the *Many* farm, a key position for the taking of the village of Chavignon. Everything was well with the Colonial regiment next to us. Things were not so well with the *Chasseurs* at our right. They had had a hard time of it at first defending the Panthéon and Bovette caverns, and later had met with stout resistance at the

Bois de Veau. In the 6th Regiment Major Frère had been wounded, and despite his tremendous energy had been forced to pass on his command to Captain Chalumeau. Major de Bellegarde of the 46th was killed outright.

Toward four in the afternoon two *Chasseurs* arrived at the post. Jean-Marie was one of them. They delivered by word of mouth the orders which the General had not dared to commit to writing, as the couriers would have to pass through a zone that was still disputed. While they were waiting to rejoin their corps I talked with Jean-Marie.

"You see, it *is* possible to avoid accidents."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

The boy's expression was hard, and his features contracted.

"Do you want me to give you your letter?"

"It isn't worth while."

The battle was not yet over. I did not dare question the boy regarding the contents of the letter, but I was trying to draw some statement from him. I imagined that it might be some consolation to him if he were to confide in me. I soon learned, however, that he would never do so, and we chatted about Bessans, the châlet, and hunting.

"I am going to take you hunting with me after the war."

He smiled, wishing to make himself agreeable.

I could utter nothing but commonplaces in the presence of this man who wanted to die.

After a moment he and his comrade were summoned to receive the oral instructions they were to take back. The two men then made off in the direction of the Bois de Veau, at that time full of sharp-shooters and ambuscades.

The dark red sun dipped down to the horizon and threw into ghastly relief all the irregularities of the ground. I could not help praying for darkness to envelop and protect the two little *Chasseurs*.

The *Chasseur* Battalion had tenaciously renewed their attack on the German Imperial Guards. On the 25th of October they routed the enemy, took Pargny-Filain and reached the Ailette. I asked news of Private Couvert of the 6th Battalion: he was "missing," not having returned to La Malmaison.

His body was found in the Bois de Veau. I was present when he was identified. His breast and abdomen were riddled by sharp-shooters' bullets; there was no mark on his face, only mud, and his eyes were wide open. I could not close them.

So Jean-Marie had gone on a longer journey than had his grandfather or his elder brother. Like them he had secretly, silently, done his part in atoning for the family crime. On both the occasions when I had met him—in the cave by the

Aisne and at La Malmaison—he had had no desire to live; he had determined upon sacrificing his life. Poor boy! He had even more courage than his superiors and comrades imagined, for he had faced the horror of crime in his own family. It was that that he had not cared to survive.

When I returned to Headquarters General Maud'Huy summoned me at once.

“Well, Charlieu, how about the eyes?”

“Eyes of faith, General, eyes of hope, of sorrow, and of love.”

“Sorrow?”

“That, too, General.”

The General had the heart of a father, and could readily understand. He did not question me further, and left me to my own thoughts.

I saw once again the unclosed eyes of Jean-Marie; eyes of sorrow, yes, but of love as well, of the greatest love, of the love that redeems.

## CHAPTER XII

### BENOÎT AND MADDALENA

I SENT Jean-Marie's will to Father Etienne Couvert, Lazarist at Tien-tsin, together with every detail I was able to learn not only of the lad's death but of his life as a *Chasseur*; some personal reminiscences of his officers and comrades, and his military citation. I was unable to send the packet until nearly a month after the battle: the delay was due to my having to collect this material and being suddenly ordered to Italy under General Maistre, the victor of La Malmaison and later of Monte-Tomba. He was being sent to help the Italians along the Piave after the Austro-German offensive at Caporetto.

It was a long time before I received an answer from China—six months: the letter arrived in May, 1918. At that time Amiens was threatened, and consequently Paris. Playing her last card, Germany was attempting to bring the war to an abrupt close.

Father Couvert expressed his thanks in the warmest terms. I gathered that his soul was at peace, and that the life he was leading was no

more than a righteous endeavor to deserve death, the gate to immortality. He asked me to do him two favors: to visit his mother, telling her particulars of "the little one's" death, and to see Jean-Pierre.

I hadn't the courage to write direct to Maddalena. Etienne's asking me to see her proved that he thought me ignorant of her complicity. I was perhaps mistaken after all in my interpretation of his attitude. I had at any rate assumed that we both shared the same secret.

But I was not long troubled with these doubts: I would take up the Couvert business later, when circumstances permitted. Meantime I had other obligations to fulfil.

As I knew I should not be able to go to Savoy for some time I decided to write Maddalena giving her such details as she might wish to know. It was only right that I should do this, for has not the war taught us the lesson of compassion? I had seen too much suffering not to wish to relieve it. The poor woman had no children now: the two elder had left her, and the last had returned to the earth. Was she not sufficiently punished?

The letter I sent was returned unopened, and on it was stamped the single word "Deceased." I could not help wondering why her husband had not opened it, then I put the matter out of my mind entirely. Henceforward no link bound me

to the Couvert family. The murderer was at last alone, master of the house. I should take good care not to meet him again.

The Armistice. When the end came I was at Mayence, but was not demobilized until February, when I resumed my professional duties after a lapse of five and a half years.

Ask any ex-soldier how he felt when he returned to civil life and you will learn that he felt ill at ease and couldn't concentrate. We have been blamed for causing a "wave of laziness." Of course the criticism came from those who had not served. True, we lacked decision and initiative: but the struggle had been so violent and so long!

My friend Louis de Vimines had given me scant news of himself during the war, sending me only an occasional card from a rest camp; but when the time came for my vacation he sent me a cordial invitation to join him at Lake Lovitel. There were plenty of chamois on the slopes of Lake Muraillette, Le Peyron, and Le Signal, and among the rocks of Malhaubert. The herds had increased to an enormous extent, as all the poachers had been in the army. A herd of fifty had been recently sighted.

I should immediately examine my weapons and outfit and set out to join my friend. The war, it seemed to me, had been merely an interlude between two hunting seasons.

I accepted the invitation with alacrity: it had

succeeded in arousing me from my torpor. I felt as I had used to feel. I already enjoyed the sensation of pure mountain air in my lungs. I had had enough of "Hill 304" or "Hill 344," I was now going off to ramble at will over icy slopes and rocky precipices at 3,000 meters' altitude, alone with my gun and my thoughts and my game—when the game thought fit to come my way! Memories of earlier hunting days returned to me—of the days I used to go up into the Maurienne. I could not help thinking of it, and I was seized by an irresistible desire to see the place once again.

Claude's murder seemed like a recent event. Once more I rapidly considered the proofs or rather the circumstantial evidence. *That* was so clear, so overwhelming, as to strengthen my certainty of Benoît's guilt, and Maddalena's. Of all this circumstantial evidence one fact alone stood out: Benoît's wet clothes. The rest was merely hypothetical, circumstantial, and yet taking everything into account it would be sufficient to secure a legal conviction.

Legal conviction? Was I still thinking of that? Crimes are outlawed after ten years. Let me see: Claude was murdered on September 12—ten years ago this summer. Some few days remained before the expiration of the period. And now I began to be troubled with the same old ethical problem. Was it not my duty to bring an accusation before

September 12! My time was limited. Etienne had remained silent out of regard for his mother, and so had Jean-Marie. Would they, I wondered, have spared Benoît after she had gone? Would they have allowed the murderer to inherit the property? Would I not be carrying out their wishes in bringing Benoît to the bar of justice?

On the other hand, would they not tell me, "Respect the memory of our *Mama*: that is sacred! What right have you, who have surprised our secret, to do what we thought it our duty to refrain from doing? Say nothing, as we have done. Do not destroy the work we have begun. We have expiated the crime." To this imperious mandate would be added the voice of Jean-Pierre, more imperious than the others, of the old man who had spared his son.

Nevertheless I was tempted to go to Bessans, if only to enter the Couvert house, look into the eyes of Benoît and accuse him point-blank. But I must be certain; I could not do it if there remained the least doubt in my mind. But I *had* no doubt *now*. No, I wanted to take revenge. I, too, had spared Benoît out of regard for the others, I had taken in mine the hand I had seen strangle the life out of an animal—the animal that had taken *its* revenge by revealing the criminal. I had made up my mind to show him he had not deceived me. Once I had him at my mercy I might allow the necessary time to elapse.

So before going to Lake Lovitel I went to Bes-sans. In order to face Benoît, who might offer some resistance, I had taken precautions: he would doubtless stop at nothing if he found himself cornered. Those hands of his could kill without shedding blood. I carried a very small revolver in my pocket; I might need it if only to keep my man at a distance until I had finished talking. Then I went over beforehand the exact words I intended to say: my accusation would be mercilessly direct. I would even say that the police were coming for him immediately, and then read confession on his face. I had become used to making war on nameless enemies, but this time my enemy was to be a man known to me and to me alone. I thought of Jean-Marie's eyes, wide open in death—those eyes knew, they had understood. They prompted me to carry out my mission of justice. Even were I not to turn Benoît over to the police, I should at least enjoy the satisfaction of causing him shame, remorse, and fear.

I crossed the Haute-Maurienne by carriage. It was a beautiful day toward the end of August, but even the loveliest days are tinged with melancholy, for they are short in these narrow valleys of the Maurienne. The mountains are covered with pines and larches whose sadness is more striking in summer even than in autumn. After crossing the wild heights of La Madeleine my

heart warmed as I saw the valley widen and caught a glimpse of the church steeple at Bessans, for here I had enjoyed happiness and freedom, and physical well-being and a close contact with nature. My soul expanded at the sight and I smiled. How could I think of vengeance in this paradise of crystal air and radiance?

I left my bags at the inn near the entrance to the old town, and walked up to the church. I climbed quickly as if I expected to meet old friends, as I had used to do on previous visits. Two hens, hunting for grain, gravely preceded me. I saw no one: everybody must have been in the fields or up in the mountain pastures. Not long after, I passed one old woman who recognized me. "How do you do, Monsieur Charlieu, so you're back?" It was pleasant to be remembered. I stopped and spoke a few words about the Bessans boys who had fallen—there were over forty of them. I did not ask about Benoît.

Then I made my way back and stood outside the court of Benoît's house. I stood for a moment and drew a long breath; I would have need of it.

The outer courtyard, which you enter through an open arcade, was deserted. A small hand-cart stood just under the eaves beside a pile of wood. The ground had not been swept for a long time, and was covered with wisps of decaying straw. In spite of the heat the house door was closed, and

the windows as well. I did not see how the inmates could breathe. Of course I knew that peasants, for the most part surfeited with fresh air, are apt to keep their doors and windows tight shut. But there was something hostile and ominous in the deathly silence of the place. It had not been like this in the old days. It now looked like a dismantled fortress.

I felt my pocket to be sure that the revolver was there, and knocked at the door. It was just as well to be on the safe side. No answer.

I knocked again—still no answer.

And once again, with my cane.

A woman from one of the neighboring houses, hearing the noise, appeared at the outer door. I inquired for Benoît.

“Gone,” she answered, determined, I could see, to say no more.

The woman was too young to have known me when I was last there. Formerly everyone knew and recognized me.

“Where to?”

“I don’t know.”

If she didn’t know, he had probably not gone far, and would return before long.

“Has he gone up with his cows in the Averole Valley?”

“No.”

“Is he coming back?”

“I don’t think so.”

"Very well. Thank you."

I stood there before the closed door, disappointed and uncertain. I had counted on Benoît's being at home; it was really inconsiderate of him to deceive me! It seemed as though he had known of my coming. I could get nothing out of the peasant girl, she would not talk and that was all there was to it. It then occurred to me to pay a visit to Sérafín Ruffin. He had always been a merry fellow, a heavy drinker and eater, honest and upright and faithful. Though he was a widower he had brought up eleven children, one of whom, it will be remembered, was the pretty Mélanie.

Ruffin's house was, fortunately, inhabited, and I was given a warm welcome. They insisted that I sit down and make myself at home in their spotless stable. Without a second's delay Mélanie and a young sister laid a cloth on the table, a plate and two glasses, a knife, some cheese and wine, while Sérafín filled the glasses and offered to drink with me. The entire family observed the ceremonials of peasant hospitality, the women standing up and the men seated.

"Well, Sérafín, old man, we've both grown older."

"Can't help that."

To myself I said—everyone does—"especially you!" He had more of a stoop than ever before and the color of his nose proclaimed the intemper-

ance of his habits, though these were, to do him justice, regular. The years had given a severity to his face; and he was not so good-natured as he used to be. I soon learned the reason for this change: one of his sons had been killed and another had returned with only one leg.

"And you, Mélanie, are you married yet?"

She too, had changed for the worse. She had lost her color, and looked thinner, and was careless about her appearance. I know that peasant women age very rapidly; no wonder, when you think of the hard physical labor they must do, but Mélanie was still very young. When I last knew her she wasn't a day over eighteen. A girl oughtn't to lose her beauty at twenty-five or six. She blushed at my question:

"Oh, no, Monsieur l'Avocat!"

"Well, it's your own fault then. You used to wear such pretty ribbons. Where are they? And you used to sing *Noëls*; I'll wager you don't any longer."

"Oh, no, Monsieur l'Avocat."

And she looked at me in astonishment, with those large eyes that were still bright and beautiful in her faded face. How, they seemed to ask reproachfully, could I speak so lightly of the past? The last time I had seen Mélanie was at her betrothal ceremony. It was at the feast afterward that she had sung the *Noël*. Had I forgotten? After all, she was

only a child then, and I had imagined she had long since picked up the thread of her life. There was surely no lack of suitors for a pretty girl like her. But I was quite mistaken: she had remained faithful to her Etienne. I had only to read the purity and sorrow of her eyes to discover in them the image of fidelity.

"That's her way," said her father. He was simply giving in to the inevitable. More than once he had vainly tried to break down the girl's resistance.

And I had shamelessly, thoughtlessly re-opened an old wound. This first contact with the past taught me to be careful at my next attempt. In spite of my desire to speak of the Couverts I postponed all reference to them, waiting for the subject to arise naturally. We spoke of the harvest and of hunting.

"There's plenty of chamois on the Albaron and the Charbonel—but you don't come here any longer."

"I'm going hunting in the Dauphiné."

"You don't like Bessans any more?"

I vigorously protested, and then asked for news of my old beaters. It was in this way that I came to the fatal question.

"What about Benoît Couvert?"

"He's gone."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"Is he coming back soon?"

"I don't know."

"This evening, at any rate?"

"I'd be mighty surprised if he came back this evening."

"Then he's gone far?"

"No one knows where he's gone."

Almost identically the same answers I had received from the peasant girl. There was a mystery here, and no one was willing to speak of it. Had Benoît's guilt been discovered and had he escaped? I thought so at first.

"Why did he go?"

"Because he took it into his head to go."

So he had gone of his own free will, and not run away like a criminal. Sérafín was clearly trying to evade my questions. Like most peasants, he said no more than he wanted to say. I let the matter drop, intending to learn other facts as they might develop casually. But I must know at all costs when Benoît would return. I had no intention of letting him escape; my old hunter's instincts were now fully aroused. Never had I so wanted to have him in my power, even if it were only to let him go the next minute. I felt that in this way I should be carrying out the wishes of Jean-Pierre, Etienne, and Jean-Marie.

"So Maddalena is dead. She wasn't old, was she? I wrote her about Jean-Marie, but my letter was returned. How long ago did it happen?"

"Nearly two years."

"Two years! Was it her sorrow that killed her?"

"Well, she didn't have any disease."

It occurred to me that possibly she had inflicted punishment upon herself. Had she, after the loss of her youngest, recognized in this fatality the finger of God? I remembered how superstitious she had been.

"So it wasn't suicide?" I asked with a smile intended to mitigate the brutality of the question.

"I don't think so."

I don't think so! I was beginning to resent this persistent refusal to give me a definite answer.

"See here, Sérafín, you're not a damn bit of good. You know I'm interested in all the Couverts. You don't give me any news. Claude was my first and best beater. When his body was fished out of the Arc I felt as though I'd lost one of my family. By the way, has the murderer been found?"

"No, Monsieur l'Avocat," and he added between his teeth, "and what's more, I don't think they've looked for him!"

"You've got something on your mind, Sérafín?"

"Who, me? Oh, no! What do you mean?" he answered evasively.

"You know everyone in the Valley: you must suspect someone."

"It was all so long ago. You know, Monsieur l'Avocat, it's the same with murderers as with chamois: at first the blood is hot and wet on your hands and you're excited, but it dries mighty quick."

He would not tell me what he thought, and I returned to the subject of Maddalena. I tried the indirect method:

"As you know, I had Etienne with me after Claude's death, but God took him. You're not jealous, Mélanie?"

"I'm not jealous, Monsieur. Etienne did what was right!"

How quickly she sprang to his defence and how her eyes flashed! A chicken that had jumped up on the table and was picking the crumbs from my plate gave the girl a chance to hide her embarrassment. She chased away the intrusive bird, and amid a flapping of wings and flying of feathers, I attempted to resume:

"So he's in China now. I've heard no news of him since his brother's death."

Sérafín explained that Mélanie corresponded regularly with Rina, who occasionally sent news of Etienne.

"Mélanie wanted to join them. She may—when I'm dead, if she wants to: or when her younger sister grows up."

Mélanie bowed her head as if she dared not look me in the face. In these few words I had

read the whole drama of her love. She had nothing more to conceal from me: she was one of those women who love only once and for always. But her emotions had become spiritualized and she was now ready to give herself to humanity for the sake of one man. I recognized in her the mystic ardor of the Maurienne race, preserved intact in her pure spirit and virgin body. Instinctively I dropped my familiar manner: there was something sacred about her. She, too, through her love, was expiating the crime.

"Forgive me, Mélanie, for hurting your feelings. I have just begun to understand you."

She was surprised at my words and made a little gesture of protest meaning that a humble girl like herself had nothing to forgive. She seemed to want to re-establish the social barrier between us. But she said no more. The vocation which would ultimately take her away had already begun to affect her: she seemed to have stepped back out of the world of reality and to be enveloped in the veil that she would one day wear.

Once again I continued the litany of the Couvert family:

"Then there was little Jean-Marie. A nice boy. He seemed so gay."

"Oh, he was that," affirmed Sérafin.

"The picture of his father."

"You're dead right, Monsieur l'Avocat."

"You know, I met him during the war. I hadn't

seen him since he was a youngster. He was killed at La Malmaison—while he was on a dangerous mission. He'd asked to be sent."

"D'ye mean he *wanted* to go?"

"Why, yes, Sérafín."

"Good Lord, you don't *ask* for things like that. Of course, if they send you, it's all rights."

"But you know, Sérafín, there are some who always ask. Jean-Marie was one of those."

"Maybe he had his reasons."

This reflection was no doubt one of those peasant correctives which take the wind, as it were, out of noble sentiments and grandiose phrases and bring one suddenly down to earth. I felt that Sérafín knew something about this and was sure that the boy's secret was known in the village. I therefore followed up my advantage:

"Tell me, Sérafín, do you remember Jean-Marie's last leave? When he came back to his battalion they hardly recognized him: his old gaiety was all gone. Were there any discussions about the property, any question about Etienne's and Rina's last wishes?"

"Oh, I don't know about that, Monsieur l'Avocat. Benoît and his wife didn't get along very well together. We didn't see much of them, but the neighbors used to hear them screaming at each other; sometimes at night, too. Well, the young soldier turned up one night when they

weren't expecting him. Maybe he came in when they were fighting. That may be."

"But Maddalena loved Jean-Marie," added Mélanie from her corner.

"Yes," I repeated, "she did. How did she hear of his death?"

"It was this way," said my host. "She was alone in the house. Benoît was up on the mountain getting wood. The Mayor called on her himself. She made a terrible hullabaloo when she heard. That's the way they do in her country, you know; here we keep our feelings to ourselves. Then she ran out of the house like she was crazy. They thought she'd gone to the church or the cemetery, but they saw her taking the Averole Road, maybe to fetch her husband. But when Benoît came home that night she wasn't with him, and he hadn't seen her, so they went out with lanterns to look for her. Maybe she was spending the night at Averole Village? Well, the next day they went in that direction. Some children had seen her—she'd passed Plan-du-pré. That's where the mule-path ends, but the trail was covered even there by the snow that had fallen the night before. They managed to follow her footprints in the snow. A caravan had crossed by the path that leads over the Arnès Pass, and another up to the Oratory of Notre-Dame-des-Neiges. That's where they found her, half-buried in the snow. She'd been caught there during the night,

and frozen to death. She was lying just under the Oratory. She didn't suffer much probably. You soon lose your senses when you're being frozen."

"Poor woman! She used to give in to the call of pious pilgrimages. So *that* was her last!"

'As Sérafín was in a confiding mood I went on:

"And Benoît?"

"Benoît helped bring her back. He never talks. He spent the whole winter after her death minding his own business and not saying a word to anyone. In the spring he took his cattle to the fair at Bourg-Saint-Maurice—you know, in the Tarentaise. He got a good price for them, so they say. I don't know; I wasn't there. After that, he sold all the land, farms and everything. Everything but the house."

"But that property didn't belong to him, Sérafín?"

"Oh, yes, Monsieur l'Avocat. Yes, it did. Everything came to him by inheritance."

"Do you mean that Jean-Marie left his property to Benoît?"

"No; I mean the others gave up their rights—old Jean-Pierre, Etienne, and Rina. So you see, everything came to him."

"Well, you Bessans people have so many law-suits that you know the code better than we lawyers. What has he done with his money?"

"I couldn't tell you that. One morning he ups and goes. That was a year ago next Saint-Jean.

He followed the same road as his wife, only *he* didn't stop at the Oratory. He must've crossed over into Italy."

"Did he take his money with him?"

"Maybe he did and maybe he didn't. Monsieur le Curé says he left it all to charity—for the poor people of the parish. You can believe that or not as you like. Curés have a way of telling just what they want to tell."

"It's the truth," solemnly added Mélanie.

Her father did not contradict. It seemed as though he wished to mitigate the cruelty of his sceptical comment.

"And what's to become of the house, Sérafín?"

"Oh, it'll stay where it is."

"So I should imagine, but who's going to buy or rent it?"

"No one."

"How do you mean? It's a fine well-built house, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes, it's built to last."

"And you mean no one wants to live in it?"

"You can walk right in if you like: the key's hanging on the door."

"Why, Sérafín, what about the furniture?"

"The furniture's all there."

"Won't it be stolen?"

"No, Monsieur l'Avocat, no one will steal that."

"Extraordinary! You can't abandon a house like that!"

"Oh, yes, you can, Monsieur l'Avocat, because this one is abandoned."

"Why, this is absurd. People die, but not houses. Other people take the place of those who are dead. The Couverts are gone, someone else will take their place."

"No, no one. Houses die, too."

"Naturally, they fall to pieces when they aren't lived in, but that's not quite the same thing."

Sérafín saw no reason to prolong the discussion. But I had learned what I wanted to know, which was much more than I had imagined. At that, it was hard enough to get out of him the story of the outcome of the tragedy. I wondered how much of it he suspected, and asked myself whether the whole village as well had not learned the secret? I am inclined to think that Sérafín did, judging by our conversation. Certainly his remark on the lack of any effort to discover the criminal, his hint as to Jean-Marie's "reasons," the refusal of the parish to associate with the Couvert ghosts—surely these were sufficient proof. And the village knew, in all probability, though no one would admit it. In spite of anything that might be said about the murder and the disappearance of Benoît, no direct accusation would ever be made. As a matter of fact, the subject would be avoided and ere long the members of the family—the living with the dead—would vanish under the gathering shadows of the years.

Just before taking leave I looked Mélanie straight in the eyes. Had Etienne by chance confided to her his tragic secret before breaking the engagement? Or had he simply asked her to trust him implicitly, leaving their next meeting in the hands of God, the beginning and end of all immortal love? I was never to know, though I went away assured that she would perform her daily round of duties, with a peaceful mind and happy conscience until the day she would be summoned to meet her Etienne.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE HEARTH WITHOUT A FIRE

LEAVING Sérafîn's house I went up to the church again. From every home in the village rose a delicate thread of blue smoke, for it was the dinner hour, and women were preparing food for the men returning from work. Nature, at rest, spread a soft tranquillity over the narrow valley.

A home is not a home without its cockade of smoke. Children realize this and never draw a picture of a house without it. Have you ever seen one of their primitive attempts without those rings and curlicues intended to represent smoke? They never forget them.

But no smoke rose from the Couvert house.

I then descended and called at the Presbytery, where I was received by the Curé. He had seen service and been wounded, and was now glad to be home once again. I asked him about Benoît, but like the others, he was reticent.

"You know, I came here only a few months before he left. I had been demobilized because of my wounds. My predecessor knew a great deal about Etienne, the missionary. *I* never knew Benoît."

"I am told he spoke to no one at all?"

"He was naturally a silent man."

"I am also told that before he left he gave you the money he had received from the sale of his land and cattle, asking you to distribute it among the poor!"

"True, Monsieur l'Avocat. He would keep nothing back for himself. I made a statement of the fact from the pulpit."

I pretended to approve of Benoît's act and to agree with the priest, and added nonchalantly:

"He was a good example to the parish."

Did he think I knew nothing of the whole affair? Was he himself ignorant—or just doubtful? Was he perhaps anxious to shield the criminal? He went on:

"Not from a religious point of view. He never came to church. He never came in to kneel."

"Never came in to kneel." The sentence was illuminating. It accurately characterized Benoît who had persistently faced the tempest and preferred to drop from sight altogether rather than admit his guilt before the sole Tribunal that never refuses forgiveness.

I took leave of the hospitable Curé, planning to enter for the last time the mysterious house. I had come as a minister of justice, but now I felt only compassion.

I was reminded of a passage in *La Cité Antique*, a book for which one of my law professors had

given me the greatest affection. The passage is that in which the author speaks of Hearth Worship Among the Ancients. "Every Greek and Roman house," he says, and I think I quote correctly, "had an altar, and on that altar there always burned a fire. It was the sacred duty of the head of the house to keep the fire burning day and night. Every night the coals were banked with ashes and every morning the flame was revived by a few branches. The altar fire continued to burn until the last member of the family had perished. 'A dead fire' and 'A dead family,' were synonymous expressions."

I had never forgotten this passage. My professor, in reciting it, always put into his voice an unforgettable lyrical fervor.

In this house I had known three generations, of which there were still a few living representatives: the hermit of Hautecombe, Benoît, and the brother and sister now exiled at the other end of the world. They had all deserted the hearth and allowed the fire to perish.

Once again I passed through the door of the courtyard: Sérafín was right, I had only to push open the door. I advanced into the stone passageway I had known so well. To the left was the wood-shed, full of wood; to the right the kitchen with its copper pans and kettles; and, at the back, the vast room that did service as stable, dining-and bedroom. I was almost suffocated by an

odor of stuffiness and mould, as of a place long uninhabited. Could it be that houses, like human beings, could decompose? I hastened to throw open the shutters, and the sunlight enabled me to inspect the interior.

The stable was spotlessly clean. Benoît was a methodical and orderly man, and before leaving he had tidied up the whole house: the dishes and glasses were carefully arranged on their racks, the press-beds furnished with clean linen, the chairs symmetrically arranged round the table, on which were two simple wooden statuettes—a St. John the Baptist and a St. Anthony, Patron of Bessans—facing each other. These were, I presumed, the work of Jean-Marie, who delighted the battalion with his ingenuity in carving cane-handles. The young sculptor had caught the robust spirit of Clapier and the other local artists. On the wall, just over the table, hung a photograph of Jean-Marie in his *Chasseur* uniform. I looked for pictures of his brother and sister, but found none. Jean-Marie must have been his mother's favorite, and Benoît had allowed the picture to remain out of a half paternal regard for the boy. Possibly this affection had at times mitigated the unhappy existence of the lonely couple.

It was easy enough to reconstruct the last scene. One night Jean-Marie turns up: he has a few days' leave. He has come by way of Lanslebourg on foot. He enters the court and hears angry

voices. Making his way indoors he is suddenly apprised of the dreadful secret: a chance word or a brutal taunt, and the truth flashes over him. In the presence of his mother and stepfather he pretends to have heard nothing and dissimulates his astonishment and humiliation. Sick at heart he cuts short the time of his leave and returns to the army a "changed man." A man of quicker impulses than Etienne, less reflective and possibly less scrupulous, he is too utterly broken to seek forgetfulness and peace in this life. Death is to him the only possible escape.

Jean-Marie's death had, however, completed the epic drama by bringing about the ultimate punishment of the guilty pair. Poor Maddalena had been driven back instinctively toward her native country, blindly hoping to find there a refuge against her unbearable anguish. But a more imperious instinct had forced her to stop by the Oratory, whither she had gone years before on one of her pilgrimages. As for Benoît, he had punished himself deliberately. Like Judas he had received the reward of his crime and had remorsefully given his money to the Curé for the use of the parish. Where had he gone? Who could say? Proud, tenacious, taciturn, he was not the man to bury himself in a monastery. He might have gone to work for some farmer on the far side of the Alps. No, he was not one to run away from the police; he had gone of his

own free will. He, too, had been oppressed by the house, and the house had ended by driving him out.

The house was, indeed, I now realized, haunted by an unnameable sadness. There generation had succeeded generation during three hundred years, and God Himself had entered it: I was present when Pétronille had received Him.

The altar fire was dead, the altar itself sacrilegiously cast down. *The Fire that dies on the hearth is the end of the family cult.* I was seized with an unspeakable desolation. I had only too convincing proof that a house could have a soul as well as a body. This house, at least, was something more than a conglomeration of wood and stone intended to harbor and protect a family and reflect its character. Had it been only that, Benoît could have sold it at once, but it was informed by a spirit left behind by those who had lived in it. That spirit had until late years been a beneficent one, created by peaceable and laborious Couverts, but a new generation had brought crime and incest into the family: Benoît and Maddalena had undone the good of the past and allowed the fire to die out.

I closed the shutters and departed. The odor of decomposition nauseated me. As I passed out of the courtyard I caught sight of women's faces peering out of the windows of nearby houses. I was the first to enter that accurst home. Was

it not profanation? The suspicious glances of these neighbors were eloquent, and I knew that Bessans, as well as I had learned the secret.

My thoughts turned to Jean-Pierre. I had promised Etienne I would see him and tell him of Jean-Marie's death, the self-inflicted punishment of the guilty pair, and the ultimate extinction of the house. Then, perhaps, the old man would at last consent to tell me everything that *he* knew. What more had *he* to fear from men? The ten years' period would elapse within a few days, and Benoît would never return.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE HERMIT OF HAUTECOMBE

THE hunting-season was about to open and I hastened to join Louis de Vimines at his lodge on Lake Lovitel. Though we had not seen each other since 1913 we said nothing about the war that had separated us: our conversation was devoted entirely to the subject of chamois—the chamois we had killed and the chamois we hoped to kill.

The season was a brilliant success: I brought down seven animals, in spite of the sharp competition of the poachers. Every boy in the valley who returned from the war brought with him a Mauser and a large supply of cartridges. I have no doubt that during the whole campaign they all dreamed of the royal sport they would have after the war was over.

And then I returned to Chambéry. I had not forgotten the projected pilgrimage to Hautecombe. But the journey was sure to be a difficult one, for the single steamer on Lake Le Bourget had already been put up for the winter, and I should have to charter a fisherman's sail-boat.

The night before I set out I spent reading the

old chronicles wherein it is told of the founding of the House of Savoy by Saint-Denis.

Lamartine has turned Lake Le Bourget into the Lac d'Elvire and made it his own. But long before him it had been beloved of men with passionate hearts.

Hautecombe is a love pilgrimage. Its history is more fascinating even than that of the Couverts, and the love it commemorates is a holy love. The Abbey was founded in the twelfth century by the monks of Cîteaux, on a rock overhanging the shore. Perched on that steep bank, it looks as though it had been pushed down to its precarious position by the thick forests that cover the wild flanks of the Mont du Chat. The Abbey was no more than a refuge when Humbert III, Count of Savoy, came there to bury his second wife Anne de Zoëringen. The inconsolable Humbert, leaving his States, determined to live there for the rest of his days in solitude and prayer. The silence and peace of mountains and water were in perfect harmony with his sorrow.

But he was not to remain there long. The nobles, clergy and people unanimously bewailed the loss of their leader, whose voluntary retirement deprived them of a ruler and a successor to the throne. A committee, therefore, composed of representatives of the three classes, was sent to the Count. Starting from Chambéry the ambassadors made their way to the village of Le Bourget

and set sail over the lake to Hautecombe. The Count received them courteously, and though he suspected the purpose of their errand he feigned surprise. The leader of the clergy was the first to speak. His words were to the point, if we may credit the old chronicler: "What thing art thou doing here and what has put into thy head the strange fancy to refuse to take unto thyself another wife? Far better were it that religion did not exist than that thou shouldst permit thy land to perish without heirs and thyself without successors! Alas, if thou diest without a son who will protect, govern and defend us, and lead us into battle? Unfortunate land, well may it be said that its lord will cause our ruin! Alas, proud lord, be not the cause of our destruction, leave not thy land, which is now widowed, alone and full of sorrows! For the love of God, my lord, we conjure thee to re-marry, that we may have an heir and our country's future be assured."

To this harangue the Count replied: "Thou speakest in vain, for I will remain here and end my days in this place." Whereto the ambassadors answered that he could achieve salvation as well in marriage as alone. "Thou oughtest to marry!" they cried.

But Humbert was supported in his resistance by the Abbot and monks of the monastery. Seeing this, the nobles and the people took the aforesaid Abbot and monks aside and swore that unless

they joined the others in forcing the Count to leave and re-marry, they would set fire to the Abbey. The holy men, seized with a sudden fear, capitulated; and the Count promised to re-marry on condition that a suitable wife be found for him.

He married Béatrix de Vienne of whom was born his successor Thomas, who in turn left a magnificent family—fourteen legitimate children, Guicheron assures us, and two illegitimate. In his will Humbert asked to be buried at Haute-combe, by the side of the best loved of his three wives. The other two he had buried together at a cemetery in distant parts.

This is why the Princes of Savoy chose Haute-combe for their royal burying-place.

I, too, embarked at the village of Le Bourget and set sail over the lake. It was one of those October days that begin in a fog and end in golden radiance. The border of the lake skirts the foot of precipitous mountains, the slopes of which are everywhere cut up into deep ravines full of bushes tinted in greens and purples, and gilded by the autumn sunlight.

The Châteaux de Bourdeau, an ancient square fortress, rises on a terrace projecting from the side of the mountain, surrounded by chestnut-groves and gardens. Beyond the château there is no sign of human habitation: all is wild and uncultivated, with gaunt rocks almost buried under

a carpet of shrubbery. Between my boat and the shore the water was a dark, ominous-looking green, while out toward the middle of the lake it was turning from pearl gray to a vivid blue as the sun gradually melted through the low-lying mists. The opposite shore is a smiling shore, sweet and restful to the eye. Yonder is the hill of Tresserve half hiding Aix, and there Saint-Innocent with its spire emerging from the tree-tops; and La Chambotte, a diminutive Alp; and over there that great opening of the horizon marks the spot where, beyond the low-lying Château de Chatillon, the Lake is lost among the rushes of La Chautagne.

Passing the last rocky headlands extending down from the Mont du Chat, I catch sight of the Abbey of Hautecombe. Seen from this point it looks like a white ship ready to set sail into the lake. Its gothic tower—the Tour du Phare—completes the resemblance, for it looks exactly like a mast. Between the cliff and the water there is room only for the wall, originally thrown up for the protection of the royal tombs. It would be an ideal spot for meditations on death were it not for a certain festive atmosphere; this corner of Savoy invites complete abandonment to the joys of life. Sometimes on summer nights you may catch sight of the fireworks at Aix, a constant reminder to the monks of human turmoil. A small matter, perhaps, but such things assume

a disproportionate importance in the eyes of men who have renounced the world.

I stepped ashore and started up the short avenue of plane-trees that skirts the outer walls of the Abbey. Passing by the celebrated fountain I rang the bell. The brother who received me offered to show me the chapel, but I declined and asked to see "Brother Couvert."

"The old man?"

It was necessary to demand formal permission of the Superior.

The Superior received me in a cloister surrounding a lovely rose garden. The flowers bathed this old Florentine cloister in a flood of soft light.

"Here's your friend," said the Superior. "You will find it pleasant in the garden just now: the sun is shining."

He ushered us both toward the gardens overhanging the Lake. Meantime I had had no opportunity of looking at "my friend," and had scarcely spoken a word to him, but as I exchanged the ordinary commonplaces of greeting and asked how he was feeling, I had leisure to scrutinize him. At first I had hardly recognized him; I had not seen him for nine years. He must have been nearly eighty. He was a pathetic shrivelled figure in his coarse robe of dirty white—almost a skeleton. This bent old man was on the brink of the grave. His cheeks were shrunken, and a thin uneven growth of white beard covered the sharp

bones of his face and the extremity of his chin. However, there remained the same regular features, the general outline so characteristic of the Maurienne race. The eyes, deep-set as they were in the hollow sockets, glowed with a tenacious fire, expressing a keen intelligence and undiminished will power. The years had bent and twisted his body, but his spirit was untouched. He followed my conversation, immediately comprehending the most subtle allusions, and answering briefly, as if he were afraid of tearing away the veils that shrouded his mystery.

Though his intelligence remained, I rather think his feelings had lost their edge. Old men are either too emotional or not sufficiently so. He listened in silence to my account of the manner and reasons of Jean-Marie's death, but when I had finished he seemed indifferent. Seeing that he showed so little feeling, I told him of Maddalena's still more tragic end. He had heard of her death through Etienne, but knew no details. To my great surprise he pronounced this brief funeral oration:

"You oughtn't to go out of your own district for a wife!"

He was obviously blaming Claude for not marrying a girl from Bessans or one of the neighboring villages. Claude had evidently done wrong in crossing the mountains and bringing home an unknown Italian wife. *She* was to blame for

everything; it was she who had ruined the home.

But was it indeed she who had seduced Benoît? True, he had seemed scornful toward her, especially at first. Had she flirted with him, worn those pretty ribbons and assumed that virginal air for the purpose of overcoming his hostility? Had she made his conquest out of pique, jealousy, passion? I wondered if Jean-Pierre had suspected? He could not, I knew, be certain, as he had not discovered the secret of their relations until after Pétronille's death.

Then I asked about Benoît, but the old man knew nothing of him. Etienne, who received the news from the Curé of Bessans, had not written to his grandfather about Benoît's disappearance. Was this not proof enough that Etienne had not forgotten, even if he had forgiven? He could not bring himself to write the name of his uncle —his stepfather.

I next told the old man what I had learned from Sérafín: the long winter after Maddalena's death when Benoît had lived in total isolation; the sale of the cattle, the farms and pastures, the following spring; the strange gift to the Curé, and the mysterious departure to unknown regions. As I finished the poor old man, quite lost in the folds of his voluminous robe, uttered a piercing cry. This cry, torn from the heart of the patriarch, expressed the old man's horror on realizing that his race had become extinct.

"And the house!"

His house had died before his son. His bright eyes could not see Benoît, wandering through the mountain mists, driven from his own home by remorse and fear: he saw only the old house, the house that was dead, the house in which the fire had been allowed to die, and from the chimney of which came no smoke.

Yet he had been the first to leave it, unwilling as he was to live in the presence of incest and murder. It was after his example that the others had gone away. I described in detail my last visit, telling him of the desolation that had fallen upon the great courtyard and the sickening odor of decomposition. I omitted nothing that might induce him to open his heart to me. This was not the sole motive of my cruelty, for I was to a great extent the victim of my own thoughts and experiences: I had been so closely associated with this drama that I was no longer master of my feelings, thoughts and words. He listened quietly and when I had ended he spoke as if he were merely thinking aloud:

"There are other Couverts in America."

He was wondering whether the family could be revived. Was it not possible to induce some of these Couverts to return to their native land? Graft a new branch on the decaying tree? Why, it would be like the entrance of Fortinbras in the last act of Hamlet. And I was like one of the

ambassadors who had come to Hautecombe to demand the return of Count Humbert of Savoy to his throne.

"So there are Couverts in America? Are they close relations?"

"Sons of a younger brother of mine."

"Have you their address?"

"I'll find it."

"Where?"

"There!"

He pointed to his forehead. The next instant the light had died out of his eyes and he murmured:

"That's best after all."

What was best after all? That no one should re-enter the house, that the line should become extinct, that the crime should be expiated to the end in silence? It was thus that I interpreted the tranquil expression of Jean-Pierre's face. The idea had tempted him for the fraction of a moment. I should never again try to make the old man confide in me, and I made no further allusion to the secret. I said good-bye and turned to go, but he insisted on accompanying me to the boat.

After I was seated he put one foot on the back seat as if he intended to come with me.

"Come along, Jean-Pierre," I said half in fun. His eyes were strangely troubled and I am sure he seriously considered the proposal—but only

for an instant. This little boat, ready to put out from his shore, symbolized his former independence, and the possible resumption of authority. For a second I imagined him picturing to himself a triumphant return to the house in which he had ruled, but he relapsed once more, submissively obedient to the rules of his order. One word, that now rose to his lips, had sufficed:

“Benoît!”

It was for Benoît’s sake that he had given up everything and accepted the humility of personal service. He was expiating Benoît’s crime. But the wandering fugitive had not yet, according to the ancient expression, “acquitted his life.”

He thought I had not heard him, for he had hardly raised his voice above a whisper. He was sure I could not have understood.

I rose to my feet and standing on the gunwale, I kissed him good-bye.

Turning round in my seat at some distance from land, I watched his frail silhouette diminish.

He stood watching me until the boat was no more than a speck, then turned round and returned to the monastery.

## CHAPTER XV

### WEEDS

THE coarse white robe under the plane-trees, the huge white ship-like monastery of Haute-combe, the mauve and lilac surface of the lake under the evening sky—such was the last setting of the drama which I had myself reconstructed without the direct evidence of any other living soul.

From Le Bourget I returned to Chambéry on foot. In the fields peasants were burning great piles of those weeds which the Savoyards call *Covasses*. The ashes are used to purify the soil.

The sun was setting in a glorious riot of dark red, an autumn sunset.

“Yes,” I mused still under the influence of my visit, “these weeds purify the earth ready to receive the new seed, to give it life, and eventually to render a rich harvest of rye and oats and wheat. Is it not possible that a like phenomenon should take place in the realm of the spirit? Cannot a whole race be rid of what is evil and emerge purified? Will not the virtues of preceding generations atone for the vices of the last? Was not old Jean-Pierre right in wishing for a moment to

reinstate his relatives in the house of his fathers, desiring that they should again kindle the fire that had gone out? Surely, after so much sacrifice, the crime had been atoned for?"

As I passed along the road I pictured other fires whose flames were higher and brighter than those about me, flames that rose far over and beyond the horizon: over the cemetery of Bessans where lay the honest hard-working ancestors of Jean-Pierre and the saintly Pétronille whom God had visited in her stable; over the high terrace of Hautecombe; flames at the ends of the earth where Etienne and Rina were consecrating their lives to the work of humanity; flames that sprang from a shell-riddled wood on the Chemin des Dames, at the foot of La Malmaison; and last of all the ardent flames that supported the pure and faithful heart of Mélanie, who had renounced an earthly love for another and a greater.

If weeds can purify the soil is it not possible that the flames of sacrifice can dispel the shadows of crime? Surely human justice is satisfied with voluntary expiation such as this, attesting as it does the solidarity of the race and its power of redemption!

THE END



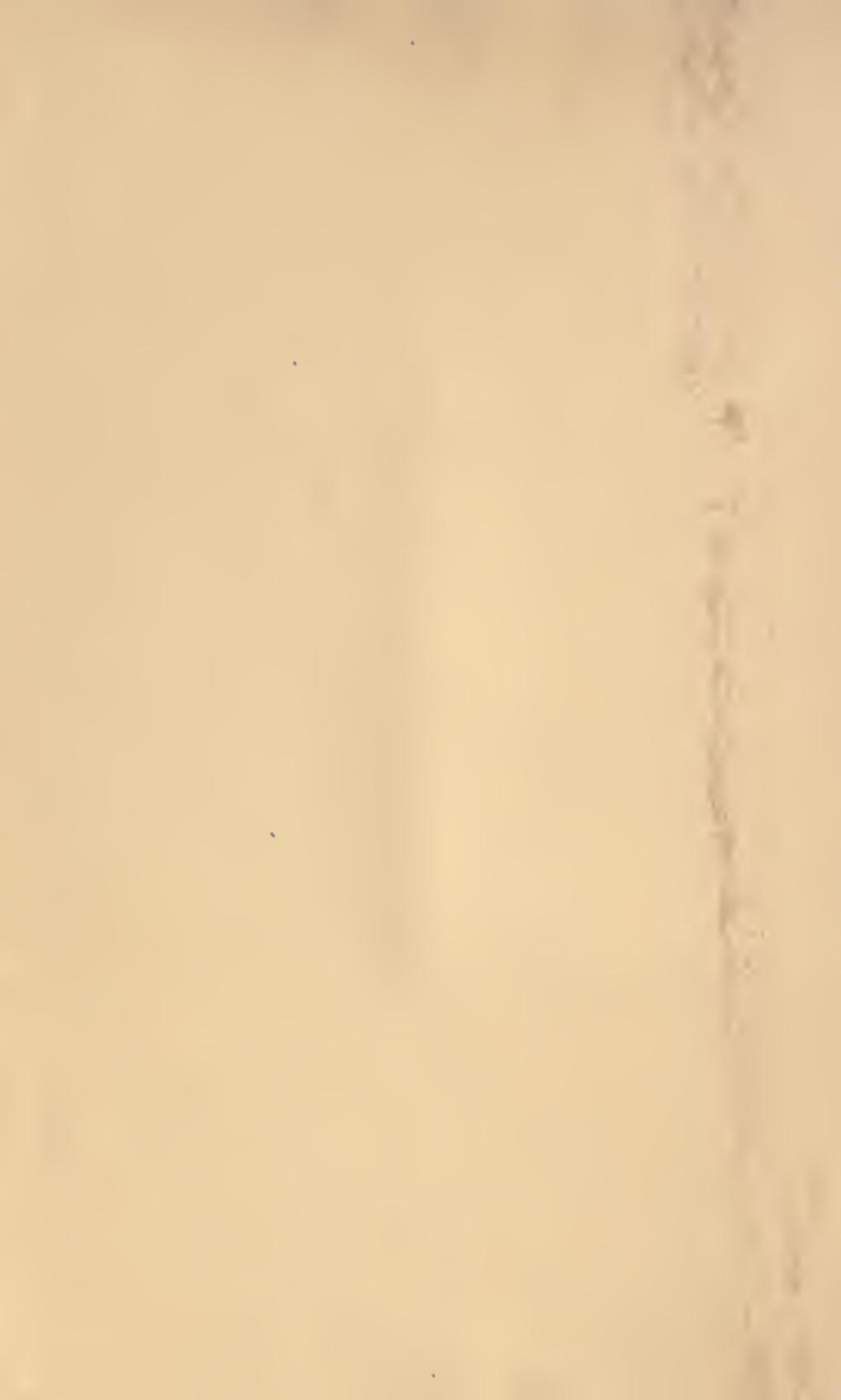














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